

Teaching and Training Parrots



Created by
The Gabriel Foundation



Why do we train our birds?



This photo is from a training session with Jay, where we practiced having Jay walk onto a platform and then into his carrier without handling or restraint in preparation for a surgery!

Parrots love to learn! Training is a form of enrichment that provides physical exercise, mental stimulation, and teaches birds to cooperate in their own care.

There is often a learning curve involved for both the parrot and the person, but once your birds "learn to learn," they will look forward to training time!

Other benefits of training include:

- ★ *Better understanding your bird's body language*
- ★ *Working on two-way communication with your parrot*
- ★ *Changing undesired behavior*
- ★ *Calmer parrot during reproductive hormone times of the year*



Step 1 - Finding Reinforcers

Definition



A reinforcer is any stimulus that increases the likelihood of a behavior occurring in the future.

There are several categories of commonly used reinforcers:

- 1. Food!** This is often the best and easiest reinforcer to use. Look to see what food or foods a parrot will choose to eat first from their bowl.
- 2. Praise and attention!** You can always add praise to another reinforcer, but be aware that praise alone often isn't the strongest reinforcer.
- 3. Physical touch!** Does your bird enjoy head scratches or maybe a rub on the beak? This can be a great reinforcer to use when training cooperative care skills like wearing protective clothing.

Other? The more reinforcers the better! Maybe your bird loves to be misted! Or they have a favorite toy!



*Keep in mind, the reinforcer depends on your bird!
What is a reinforcer to one bird may not be a reinforcer to another!*



Training requires repetition! Offer small pieces of food such as breaking favorite nut pieces into several smaller pieces as not to slow down training or your bird becomes satiated.

Step 2 - Utilizing Markers

Definition



A marker, also known as a secondary reinforcer, tells your bird the exact moment your bird has performed a behavior correctly and is the predictor of reinforcement to come!

One commonly used marker is the clicker! Dog trainers often use a clicker -- clickers are precise and deliver a consistent sound for clear and fast communication.

When working with birds, a clicker can be cumbersome when trying to use our other training tools. Instead, we recommend using a verbal marker!

A verbal marker can be any word you choose. The most commonly used markers are either "good" or "yes."



Click here to watch a video on how to train your marker!

How to train a marker:

- 1. Determine your food reinforcer!*
- 2. Have 7-10 tiny pieces of favorite treat ready to give your bird.*
- 3. As your bird takes each small piece of treat say "good."*
- 4. After 7-10 reps, you have taught your bird that "good" signals that the favorite treat follows.*



Luring

A lure is showing something of value to the bird such as a favorite treat to help get a behavior started!

Lures can be used 1-3 times -- at this point we would want to fade out the lure. If the behavior hasn't started by the third time then stop and rethink your plan.

The reason for quickly removing/fading the lure is so that it doesn't become part of the cue, meaning you end up having to show a treat every time you request the behavior. Some birds will also start to bargain with you....bigger treat? 2 treats? Not something you want to happen.



A lure should remain stationary and not be dragged or moved!



Here you can see Jessica using a lure with Iggy while he learns to step onto a scale!

Shaping

Shaping is used when teaching most new behaviors.

It's the process of differential reinforcement of successive approximations that move closer the goal (new) behavior.

Example for a wave: slightly raise foot, R+, raise a little higher, R+, continue reinforcing each step until foot is held high.

Take cues from your bird. If steps are too small, a bird may become uninterested or satiated. If steps are too big, a bird may not understand what to do.

Repeat approximations once or twice unless your bird goes further. If you repeat one approximation too many times, your bird may become stuck and not continue to move towards the goal behavior.



Here Shauna is shaping an "open mouth, tongue down" behavior

More on Shaping a New Behavior

From S.G. Friedman, Ph.D.

“

Shaping is our sharpest tool for teaching new behavior by 1) reinforcing approximate responses that gradually lead to the final behavior (the goal or target behavior) and 2) extinguishing (withholding reinforcement) for those approximations that lead us farther away from the goal. One of the keys to shaping without frustration is to keenly observe the natural variation with which responses are repeated. From that natural variation, we can often select with reinforcement the next closer approximation to the target behavior. Another key to shaping is to return to an earlier successful approximation if the animal and trainer get "stuck" (not advancing.)

”

For more details about shaping, read the article "Shaping New Behaviors" [here](#).

More on Shaping a New Behavior

- ★ *Observe approximations towards the goal behavior, bird does a behavior towards the goal with some hesitation, reinforce.*
- ★ *Bird does approximation without hesitation, reinforce then raise criterion (look for behavior that gets closer to the final goal behavior).*
- ★ *If bird does not meet criterion withhold reinforcer until it offers an approximation towards the goal, reinforce.*
- ★ *If bird does not offer an approximation then lower the criterion, go back to the last approximation where the bird was successful and again start reinforcing approximations towards the goal behavior.*
- ★ *Be aware of moving to quickly or to slowly when training. Your bird will let you know. Move to slowly a bird will become bored and satiated, to quickly the bird won't know what to do.*

Prompts and Cues

A prompt helps to initiate a response. A gesture can be a prompt. Prompts may do a lot of guiding when starting to teach a behavior and then prompts may become smaller until they are a small gesture such as the flick of finger, or tilt of the head from the trainer.

A common prompt is when we offer a hand or finger for a bird to step-up.

A cue is subtle hint to perform a behavior. A prompt provides more direct guidance towards a requested behavior.



Shauna is using a directional cue while working with a scarlet macaw!

Starting with the basics...

Target Training!

Definition



Targeting is teaching the bird to touch or almost touch an object. That might be the end of a chopstick, a finger, or any object you choose.



To start, reinforce small approximations towards the goal behavior. It might start with your bird looking at the object, "good", R+ delivered (treat), the bird leans towards object, "good," R+ and finally touches the object.

Once your bird is touching the object, have it touch to the right side of the bird, the left, then take a step or two to touch, then more steps to touch. Work on having your bird follow the target by showing it a few feet away, and waiting for the bird to touch it.



Click on video to play

Target Training... Leveled Up!

Many people will teach their bird to target... but then they don't know what to do with it! Here are some ideas of where to go next!

- ★ **Targeting to follow an object** - if your bird can proficiently follow a target, you can use this to teach a spin, have your bird station at a particular spot in their cage, walk through obstacles, etc. The possibilities are endless!
- ★ **Try a different object to target** - Chopstick, finger, hand, vinyl pipe end, puzzle piece, syringe and more! Using different objects and colors is a fun way to start working on distinction.
- ★ **Start training different body parts** - We initially train our birds to touch something with their beak. Now let's try having them touch their wing, L/R foot, or tummy to the target instead! These behaviors help with things like a restraint free physical exam!
- ★ **Combine different objects with different cues** - beak to syringe, right foot to hand, tummy to finger, etc.

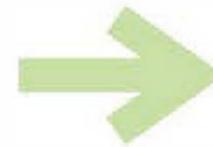
Let's check out what Shauna is working on with Casper!



Click on video to play

Stepping Up

Stepping up is a chained behavior, meaning more than one behavior is involved! Holding up one foot, shifting weight, leaning forward, putting foot down, lifting second foot and putting second foot down. Also consider that some birds may not be comfortable with their new surroundings, making them hesitant to step up.



[Click on video to play](#)



Key tips!

Always offer a steady hand.

Don't move your hand until after the second foot is on your hand.

Always reinforce stepping up.

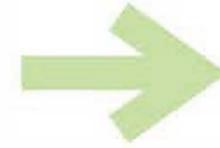
Give the option of going back to the perch before moving bird away from its perch or cage.



I might bite you if you pull upward as soon as I put one foot on your hand. Wait for both of my feet!

Stepping Up Continued

This video demonstrates an alternative approach to working on the step up behavior. Take a look at the steps below!



[Click on video to play](#)



Key steps!

1. Place one hand on the perch.
2. Ask bird to approach the hand, reinforce.
3. Have bird go back to the beginning spot (reset), reinforce and repeat.

Then,

4. Bird walks over and past the hand.
5. Bird steps onto the hand, reset.
6. Bird steps onto hand,
7. Hand lifts up 1/4", back down, reset.
8. Work on hand going a little higher each time as bird is comfortable, back down to perch, reset.

Remember! If one method of training isn't working for your bird, take a look at your plan and don't be afraid to try something different! Always take cues from your bird, working at your bird's comfort level!



[Click here to watch a video that uses an extended perch and closed fist technique to teach a step up!](#)

Recall Training



Teaching a bird to fly to you, recall training, is not only an incredibly fun behavior to train, but recall can also be helpful in the case a bird is somewhere you can't reach or accidentally escapes from the house!

It starts with "step-up" and then extending that step up so your bird has to stretch to reach your hand or second perch. Once that is going well, move perches a little further apart, the bird hops, flaps its wings. The next step is a bit further and your bird takes a short flight and so on.

Every approximation needs to be reinforced! Use your verbal marker, like "good," a treat, or other high value reinforcer!

Harness Training

Harness training is highly suggested for clipped or flighted birds for their safety if taking a bird outside without using a carrier or other enclosure.

Note: Properly clipped birds can still fly

For teaching, work on your bird approaching the harness, be sure to reinforce approximations.

Hold harness up so bird pushes its head through the harness loop.

Next, work on your bird letting you touch and lift its wings. Then work on placing wings into harness.

Teach at your bird's comfort level, don't rush training.

Harness Demo!

What it looks like to put a harness on a willing birdy participant!

With TGF Staff Melissa and her adopted TGF alumni, Lady Anna!

Click on Video to Play

Crate Training

For this skill, your bird should be able to target.



Set crate on a table, door open, and secure the door so that it stays open.

Ask bird to approach the crate door opening. Reinforce each approximation.

Target bird to enter the crate, reinforce. Have bird come out, reinforce. Bird enters crate, going a bit further in, comes back out.

Now work on the door: start to close it just a little, bird looks at door, door opens back up, bird comes out. Give the bird control of the door!

Eventually door is closed, reinforce, treat, treat, treat, open. Repeat working on duration of bird being in the crate.



Training Medical Behaviors

Medical Behaviors



-  Teaching medical behaviors to your bird may be helpful for veterinary visits by lowering stress for your bird and the veterinarian.
-  Don't be disappointed if your bird doesn't do taught behaviors at a veterinary appointment.
-  For behaviors to be fluent, they need to be **generalized**, meaning taught in more than one setting.



Medical Behaviors Video



This video demonstrates a few medical behaviors:

- Open mouth and tongue down, for vet to look inside of the mouth
- Head tilted sideways to receive eye drops
- Put head into anesthesia mask
- Remain calm accepting exam with a stethoscope
- Offer nail for nail trim



Click on video to play

Notice when he pulls his foot away but then offers it again. That shows comfort and trust!

Scale Training

Start by having your parrot follow a target walking towards a scale. Reinforce each approximation.

Then target the scale so parrot steps onto the scale to check its weight.

Add cues such as "scale" and if you like "off."

Targeting is great for directing a bird where to go. Also, a bird can learn to target feet to a specified spot or sticky note, a bird can learn to target any part of its body.



Click on video to play

Nail Filing



Nail filing is another chained behavior that requires proficiency in a number of behaviors to achieve our goal behavior!

The first step is for your bird to show comfortable behavior with whatever tool you use to file nails. That might be a Dremel, emory board or nail file. If your bird isn't comfortable with the tool then start with desensitization.

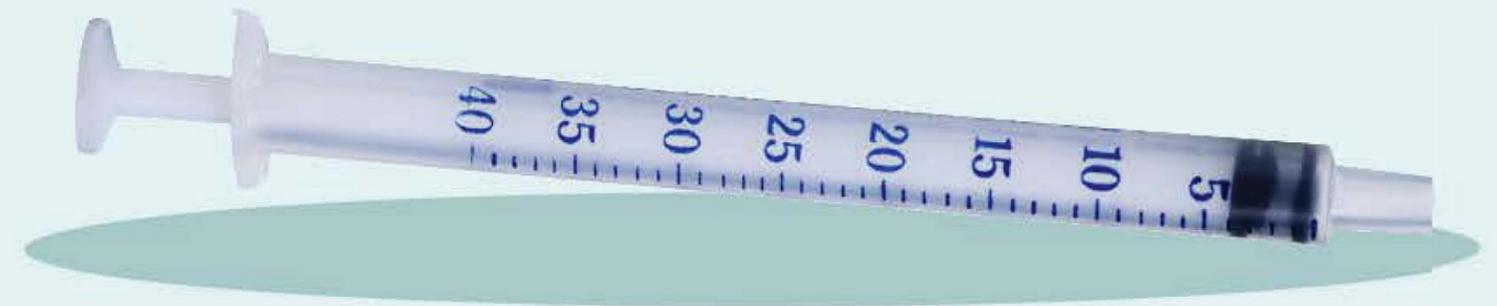
One way to teach is through protective contact. Teaching bird to put one foot on the cage bars and accept nail filing.

Another is to work with your bird on a perch. Start out by touching a nail, then file one second, two seconds, etc. Don't forget to reinforce!



Here you can see Shauna utilizing protective contact! The bird is targeting their foot to the wire, prompted by Shauna's raised hand, where she can then touch the nail with the Dremel!

Syringe Training



Syringe training starts out as target training, touching the end of a syringe.

Once bird is touching the syringe, work on duration—continuing to touch the syringe tip. Duration: touch, treat, touch, pause a second, treat, touch, pause a few seconds treat, etc.

Then add some liquid to the syringe and give one drop to the bird to start.

Because medicines can taste bad introduce sweet, sour and bitter tastes.

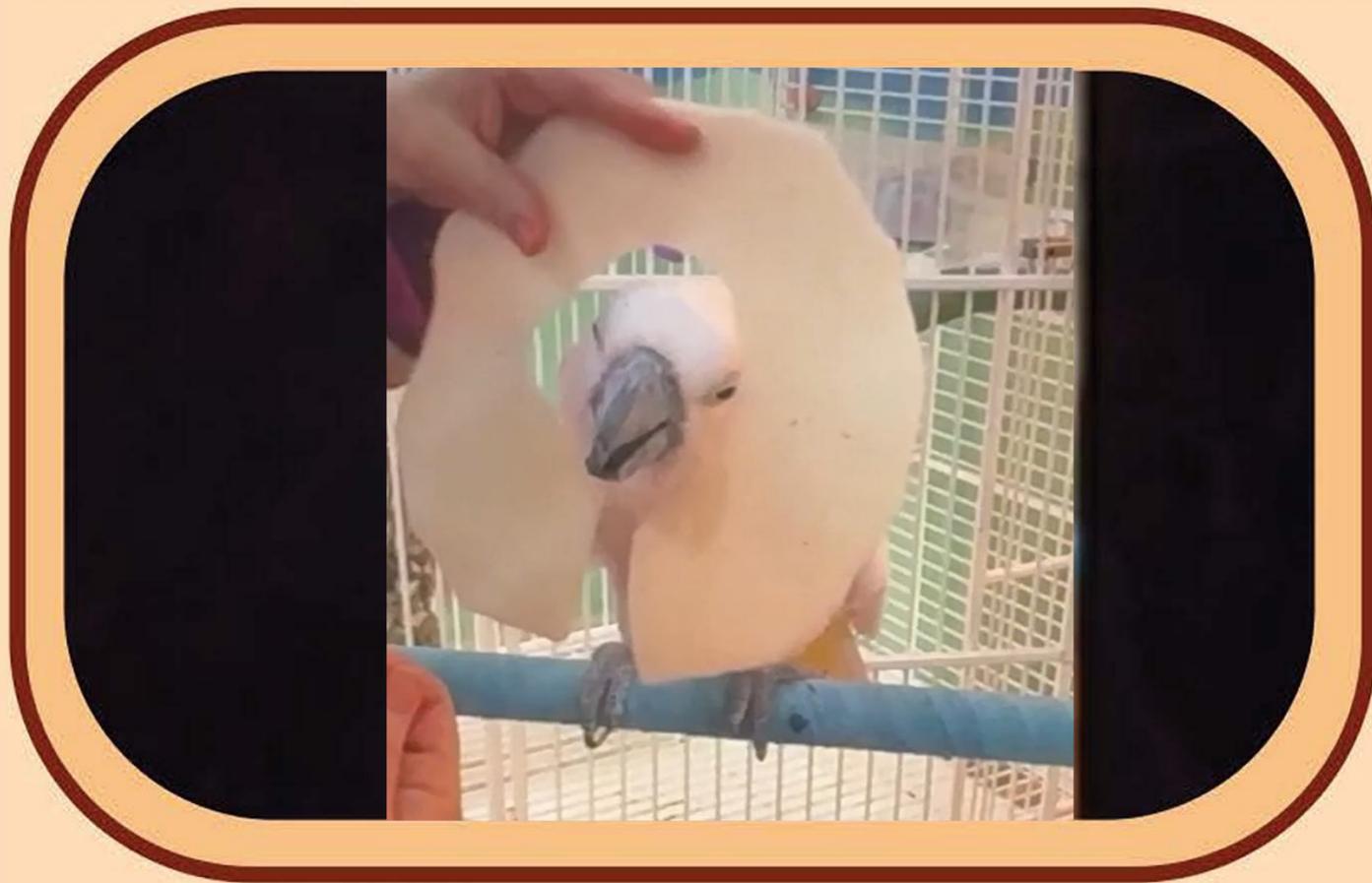
Be sure to always reinforce and use super high value treats for your bird's good work.



Click on video to play

Collar Training

Collar training is important in the event your bird has surgery or other reason to wear a collar. Training avoids a bird being confused, possibly thrashing, being stressed, etc.



*Click on
video to play*



This video demonstrates some steps you might use: working **at your bird's pace** on putting its head into the collar, showing relaxed behavior while the collar is on. Next, build up the duration of having a collar on.

Felt is used in the video. A cardboard cutout could be another idea to try!

Open Mouth Behavior



This video is an example of **free shaping**. More often open mouth is taught with shaping steps: Bird grabs object such as horizontal cage bars with open mouth, then work on duration of the bird holding onto bars for person to look down their throat.

Another part of this behavior is for the parrot to hold their tongue **down** so vet can see down their throat.



Click on video to play

Stethoscope Training



Click on video to play

Cooperative medical training also includes using a **stethoscope**.

Your bird learns to remain perched while the stethoscope approaches.

The stethoscope approaches the bird and then the bird ideally targets it's belly to the stethoscope: **walking to the stethoscope and even pushing the belly towards it.**

Place the stethoscope on each side of the bird and then on the lower back.



Towel



Not every bird is comfortable with being wrapped in a towel. Slowly introduce a towel and keep a sharp eye on your parrot's **comfort level**.

This could also be done by laying a towel on a flat surface such as a table or counter top.

Take cues from your parrot. As soon as you see any sign of discomfort, remove the towel.

Give your bird a voice and control of the towel.

These 2 videos show a cockatoo, Casper, who is not quite sure about towels. Even so he did a few videos to show how you might work with your bird. Because of his very trusting relationship with his person the videos were done quickly in order to demonstrate. You will likely want to take more time with your bird working on this behavior.



*Click on
videos to
play*



Woohoo!

That's the end of our teaching and training parrots presentation!

Before you go, here are a few helpful tips for your upcoming training sessions:



When giving a treat to your bird, deliver high so your bird is standing tall.



If your bird won't step up while in the cage, check to see if you are blocking the doorway. If so, move to the side giving a visual escape path and try asking again for step-up.



If training is going slow, consider motivation at the time and if are you giving a high enough value reinforcer.



Be mindful of any environmental distractions while training.



Always have reinforcers on hand and consider putting together a training kit (reinforcers, target objects, etc.)

