

THINGS THAT MAKE YOU GO “HMMM”

Steve Martin
President, Natural Encounters, Inc.

In this ever increasing world of avian enthusiasts there are many different opinions and a great deal of contrasting information. In this paper I will deliver a perspective that may be outside the norm on some commonly accepted points of view, but most importantly, I hope it will stimulate thought that may lead to a better understanding of the birds in your lives.

As always, when I speak about birds I speak from my heart. I mean to offend no one, but often do, as I pursue my passion for educating people. I have dedicated my life to educating people about birds and the natural world that is disappearing before our very eyes. I have learned so much about our avian friends over the past 40 years or so, and the more I learn, the stronger my passion for them grows. My motivation for speaking to you about birds today is to help you understand them better, pure and simple.

It may be beneficial for you to understand where I have come from and how I have developed some of my ideas that I will share with you today. I got my first bird about 40 years ago and began training it almost immediately. What started as a fascination for birds grew into a passion and ultimately a career. For the past 22 years I have been a professional bird trainer specializing in the presentation of free-flight birds in interpretive programs. The most important tool in training free-flight birds is a keen perception of the bird's behavior. It is this understanding of what motivates birds and what influences behavior that has allowed me to train over 700 free-flight birds without ever losing one. Training birds that can fly away at any time forces a trainer to develop sensitivities that are not required when working with birds that have clipped wings. These sensitivities are things like reading a bird's body language, which mainly including the subtle look of the eye, body posture, and the position of the bird's feathers. The consequence of a poor training decision when working with free-flight birds is much more significant than when working with a bird that has clipped wings.

Another important influence on my interpretation of bird behavior has come from studying bird behavior in the wild. My passion for birds runs very deep. I have always been an avid bird watcher. From the earliest time I can remember I have watched birds and studied their behavior. I have also had the opportunity to study wild birds in Central America, South America, Asia, Africa, Australia, and New Zealand. These experiences have had a huge influence on the way I think about the behavior of pet parrots.

One more important area of influence on my bird behavior philosophy comes from my association with the avian scientific community. There is a huge rift between the scientific community and the pet bird community. Each discipline has members who are passionate about birds, but these passionate people rarely find common ground when it comes to discussing bird behavior. My association with such groups as the Association Of Field Ornithologists, American Ornithological Union, The World Parrot Trust and others has provided me with great insights into wild bird behavior. Understanding natural behavior is often key to understanding captive behavior. Much of the behavior we see in pet birds is hard wired, or driven by instincts. The more you know about natural behavior the better you will be able to interpret captive behavior. It is very important it is to use natural behavior as your guide in developing an accurate understanding of the behavior of pet parrots.

Working with free-flight birds, studying birds in the wild, and my association with the scientific community is what has allowed me to develop the behavior philosophies that I will share with you today.

Anthropomorphism

Anthropomorphism is giving animals credit for having human emotions and qualities. It is the single most important obstacle in developing a valid understanding of your bird's behavior. Anthropomorphism is also the great divide between the scientific community and the pet bird community.

It is easy for people to assume that parrots are as intelligent as a two year old child, especially when we have so many people telling us it is so. It is easy for people to think that their parrot does things to impress them or gets his feelings hurt when you don't say hello to him when you walk into the room. How many parrot owners have parrots that they think show off for them or play tricks on them, or do things to entertain them? How many parrots have been accused of punishing their owners, or being mad at their owners for something they did in the past? Unfortunately, most parrot owners share these thoughts.

Parrots are not two year old kids, not even close. They have no concept of punishment, they have no sense of humor, are incapable of lying, and as hard as it is to hear, they do not care about your feelings. Parrots, like most other non-human organisms, care primarily about themselves. Things that are most important to a parrot include survival, breeding, and avoiding injury and death. Now all this may sound like a rather harsh, cold statement, but it is true. Of course we don't like to hear these things because we all think our parrot loves us. And, just like in the wild, our parrots probably do love us. They readily bond to us like they would a mate in the wild and protect the territory they share with us from intruders.

A woman at a seminar told me the story of your yellow-naped amazon parrot and what happened when she left it with the neighbors when she went on vacation. It seems that when she went to the neighbor's house to retrieve her bird after two weeks away, the bird bit her when she put her hand in the cage. The local expert at the pet shop told her the bird bit her because it was mad at her for leaving it with the neighbors while she was on vacation. The bird was punishing her. My interpretation on the situation is very different.

In the wild parrots bond to one mate and if that mate dies they simply go find another. They don't pine away for months and years, they just go find another mate...a good survival strategy for the species. They do much the same in captivity. When the woman left her bird at the neighbor's house the bird just sort of forgot about its owner and set up housekeeping with the neighbor. I asked the woman how the bird got along with the neighbor and she said the neighbor had a great time with the bird. They were best friends. I then asked how the bird felt about her once she got the bird home and she said the bird was back to its old self and acted fine.

I believe, in the most natural way, the parrot's instincts caused the bird to find a new mate after the original owner disappeared from its life. Then, when the original owner returned, the bird reacted out of its desire to protect the new territory from intruders and bit the woman when she put her hand in the cage. After she took the bird home, the neighbor had disappeared from the bird's life so it was happy to go back to the way things were in the beginning.

Biting

Many people feel that being bitten is all part of having a parrot as a pet. My philosophy is that you should never get bit. If you get bit you are doing something wrong. I work with hundreds of parrots each year, and probably get bit only once a year. I have 18 trainers on staff and each of them work with hundreds of parrots each year and almost never get bit. The reason we don't get bit is that we have adopted the policy of "All Positive and No Negative." We never make a bird do anything it doesn't want to do. We never force a bird, or try to dominate a bird, in any way.

Biting is not natural for parrots. They bite when they have exhausted all other attempts at communicating their discomfort. Birds do not bite in the wild. They exhibit a myriad of displays that express their emotions but only in rare cases of territorial aggression do they actually fight to the point of drawing blood like they do in captivity.

Parrots will argue over perches, food, and other objects, but almost never do these arguments escalate even to the point of physical contact.

In captivity, however, we have created an unnatural environment that forces birds to do unnatural things, like bite. Most importantly we have taken away their opportunity to flee. In the wild a parrot would simply fly away from a bird, or other creature, that it was not comfortable with. We put birds in small confinements where they are forced to accept other creatures and humans. Too often we humans push our birds to the point that they bite out of defense.

I have read too many times that a bird sitting on your hand when a stranger walks into the room will bite you to alert you of danger. This interpretation may make sense to some people, but certainly not to the birds. Can you imagine a bird biting its mate in the wild every time an eagle flew by. That's not a very good survival strategy for the species, and certainly wouldn't encourage very strong pair bonds. Nature has provided parrots with much more effective forms of warning other parrots of danger. These communications range from the subtle look of the eye and erect body posture to very obvious alarm calls. Besides, like I said before, parrots care about themselves. When an eagle flies over in the wild, a parrot either freezes or simply sounds the alarm call and flies away. It would never take the time to run over to its mate and bite her on the foot taking his eye off the eagle and endangering his own life.

Birds also learn to bite for a desired response. A pet parrot may learn to bite a hand reaching up to take it off the top of a cage or off a person's shoulder. This bite begins as an expression that the bird does not want to leave its perch and can evolve to the level where the bird has learned to bite to get the person to leave it alone. Birds live in the here and now. Even a delay in time of a few seconds while the person goes to get a perch to scrape the bird off the top of the cage is enough to let the bird realize that it has stopped the person from taking the bird off the perch.

Hugs and petting

Hugging and petting is not natural for parrots. Humans, like many other primates, instinctively understand hugs. Hugs are a natural part of their interaction with conspecifics. To us, hugging is so natural that it is easy for us to assume that it is an accepted part of all animals' lives. We hug our dog, our cat, and we hug our birds, especially young hand-raised parrots. However, hugging is not a natural action for parrots especially after they have left the nest. Nothing in the wild ever encompasses a parrot's body after it leaves the nest, except maybe a predator. We can hug young parrots and if we continue the action into later life the bird will accept it indefinitely. However, it is not wise to assume that all parrots like to be hugged. I have often read articles where people are encouraged to give their bird a hug as a form of positive reinforcement. Many, if not most, adult parrots will find this action threatening instead of reinforcing.

Petting is much the same as hugging when it comes to how parrots feel about it. To a parrot, petting is not natural. We all know that many parrots enjoy being preened and scratched by people. This action is very similar to the mutual preening that parrots perform on each other in the wild. However, the petting that most people do to their parrot, which is similar to what they do to their dog and cat, is an unnatural action for the bird. Just like with hugging, nothing encompasses a parrot's body in the wild in the way a person's hand does when petting. Fortunately, most parrots easily desensitize to the petting action and readily accept it.

Hugging and petting may seem like trivial points for me to bring up. However, it is the small things that often have large effect on the way our birds think and feel about us.

Dominance Hierarchy

Many people believe wild parrots live in a social structure with a dominance based hierarchy. It is easy for us to believe this because dominance and aggression is basic to our own social structure. Humans often use aggression and dominance to influence the behavior of other people. It is very common to hear people talk of dominating your parrot and making sure he knows your the boss. This is a common philosophy that works better with dogs and humans than it does with birds. Dogs understand dominance because it is inherent to their social structure. Dogs are descendants of pack animals with a well defined pecking order.

For parrots, there is no hierarchy in the wild. In communal roost trees where hundreds of parrots may roost, there is often a great deal of squabbling over preferred perches, and one bird may displace another on a preferred perch. However, I have never seen any form of pecking order, nor have I ever heard of a pecking for wild parrots described in the scientific literature. I have also talked with experts who have studied parrots in the wild for years and none of them have ever seen any form of structured hierarchy in wild parrots. Certainly there are birds that have more history of winning the competition for preferred perches and choice food items, but the hierarchy stops there and does not continue down to other members of the flock. Plus, the bird that wins an argument with one bird may just as well loose the next argument to the same bird the next time. The only time real aggression is seen is when protecting the nest territory, and then the fighting can be sever.

Height Dominance

Height Dominance is a common term being used more and more in the pet bird world. It is common to hear people say that you should hold the parrot below eye level so it will not feel dominant over you. Many experts have said that in the wild the dominant bird is the one highest in the tree and the other birds' rankings in the hierarchy are displayed by how high, or low, they sit in the tree. I have asked many field researchers about this theory and all of them have said the same thing: there is no such thing as height dominance in groups of wild parrots. In fact, most of the researchers have said that if there was a dominant bird in a flock of parrots it certainly would not sit in the top of the tree farther away from food and most vulnerable to predators.

Anyone who has studied birds in the wild will surely know that heights dominance is not something that occurs in wild parrots and I believe it does not exist in captivity. I do believe that many birds bite people in situations that are easily blamed on height dominance. For instance, many people have been bitten when they were trying to get their parrot off the top of its cage and blamed it on another case of height dominance. However, to me it is a simple case of the bird wanting to stay on top of the cage. Being on top of the cage is enjoyable and natural for a parrot. Its instincts tell it to be up high where it can see all around to watch out for predators. What normally happens when you take the bird off the top of the cage? You put it inside the cage and shut the door, right? Most parrots will quickly learn that if they deliver a bite to your finger you will back off, at least for a short period of time while you go get a perch to scrape the bird off the top of the cage.

Now, correcting this problem is easy. As a matter of fact, if you set your goals high enough and use some basic training strategy, you can teach your parrot to climb inside the cage when you give it a simple cue while you sit across the room on the couch. All it takes is the understanding that if you want the bird to go into the cage there must be a reason for it to perform the behavior. There are many reasons, many reinforcements, that the bird understands, such as a scratch on the head, attention, treats, etc. Of course you can make the bird get into the cage by forcing it get on your hand or on a perch. But, forcing a bird to do something will not help your relationship with the bird. It doesn't understand dominance like dogs does or humans.

Positive Reinforcement is the key to a better relationship with your parrot and the tool that allows you to teach the bird most anything you can imagine. Lets say your parrot likes banana. If you put a small piece of banana in the cage and back away, the bird may climb into the cage to eat the banana. At this point the worst thing you can do is run over and close the door and lock the bird in the cage. If you let the bird come out of the cage after eating

the treat and climb back onto the top of the cage, you can then offer it another small piece of banana inside the cage and repeat the behavior. Repetition is the key to breaking down confidence barriers and training desirable behavior. After a couple repetitions the bird will begin to develop confidence and look forward to going into the cage for the treat. Now you can close the door, for a couple seconds, then open it up again to let the bird out. After a few of these repetitions you can give the bird a large reward of its favorite treats and he will probably be happy to stay in the cage to enjoy his meal. He will have also learned that going into the cage is a positive experience, not a negative one, which is why most birds bite when you try to take them off the cage.

Talking

Parrots talk when they are healthy, happy, and at ease in their environment. They talk to entertain themselves. Parrots mimic sounds they hear often and sounds they like. You cannot make a parrot mimic any sound it does not want to mimic.

Parrots will often connect the sounds they mimic with the situations in which they heard the sounds, such as saying hello when the phone rings, or good bye when you leave the room. However, they are not attempting to talk to the person on the other end of the phone and they are not bidding you farewell. They are simply connecting a sound they heard with the correct situation. When a parrot bites you and says ouch, it is simply because he heard you say that word when he bit you in the past and has nothing to do with him knowing that he hurt you. When the parrot falls off the perch and says “oh poor baby” it is simply repeating a sound he heard some previous time when he fell off the perch. He is not trying to get you to give him sympathy, in fact he has no concept of sympathy.

Parrots cannot make up human words, much less sentences, that they have never heard before. They can only mimic sounds that they have heard before, Also, parrots cannot put words together to form sentences that they have never heard. Parrots can mimic sentences that they have heard, but they cannot make up sentences that they have never heard before.

I heard a story recently where a parrot had visited a veterinarian for an exam. The bird’s owner told the bird he was going to the vet as they got into the car. Some months later, the bird injured itself and was bleeding from a broken feather. As the owner approached the bird, it looked up to her and said “lets go to the vet.” To hear this makes many people get a warm, fuzzy, feeling. To me, it is just another case of a person hearing what they wanted to hear. When I think of this story, like I do with every story like this that I read or hear about, I think about the natural behavior of the bird. Think of it this way. Have you ever taken a bird to a veterinarian for a check-up? What did the bird think about the experience? Do you think the bird knew the vet was trying to help it, or did the bird think that the vet was trying to harm it? If you say the bird knew the vet was trying to help it, why then did the bird try to bite the vet when it got wrapped in the towel? Why didn’t the bird relax and participate in the exam? Parrots do not like the vets and they do not know the vet is trying to help them. They simply have no concept that being wrapped in a towel and stuck with needles is in any way beneficial to them. Their perception of veterinarians is limited to traumatic, and often life threatening experiences. I suspect this African Grey’s owner heard the bird say something, and her mind made up a sentence that fit the situation.

Humans are equipped with a keen imagination and creative mind. It is very easy and natural, for humans to hear a parrot utter some indiscernible sounds and have their mind interpret the sounds to fit the situation. I am sure many of you have heard people miss interpret sounds your birds have made. This very thing happened to me with my mother misinterpreting something that my cockatoo said. We were both watching the bird in the cage from about three feet away. Pogo, my cockatoo, says pretty, pretty, pogo and pogo want a cracker. At times he will change things around and say pretty, pretty, cracker. This is what occurred when my mom and I were watching pogo. He said, “pretty, pretty, cracker.” My mom turned to me and said “ he said give me a cracker.” When I tried to tell her that he said “pretty, pretty cracker,” she thought I was crazy. She asserted that she is sure she heard pogo say “give me a cracker.” I didn’t argue, I learned better than that years ago. But, I did realize that there was no reason my

my mom should have comprehended pogo saying “pretty, pretty, cracker.” She had no history of these words being used together and her mind allowed her to insert the words that made sense to her at the time. This type of thing has happened to me so many times that I barely even notice it anymore. I am sure most of the cases of parrots making up words, or creating sentences to fit new situations, have to do with people misinterpreting the birds vocalizations.

Conservation

My passion for birds is equaled only by my passion for conservation. In the 22 years that I have been presenting educational bird shows I have learned a great deal about the trouble our planet is in. Natural habitat and species are disappearing at an unprecedented rate. The rate of extinction is gaining so much momentum and increasing so fast that our natural world itself is now threatened with extinction. Few people realize how important each individual species is to our own existence.

Picture this earth as a big airplane that we are all traveling along in. On the wing of the plane are hundreds of rivets that hold the airplane together. Every rivet represents a species, plant, animal, insect, etc.. Sure, you can pop a few rivets off of the wing and nothing will happen, the plane will keep flying. But, sooner or later you will pop one too many rivets and the wing will fall off and the plane will crash. We are all responsible for popping rivets in one way or another. But, the good thing is that we are the only species on the planet capable of tightening rivets by conserving, recycling, supporting conservation projects and educating people.

When I talk about conservation I am talking about much more than breeding rare birds. Last year, I heard a person at another bird organization talk about the wild bird conservation act and how it has taken away our ability to have many of the birds we want to have in our collections. She showed photos of many rare species and remarked “wouldn’t we all like to have these birds in our collections so we can breed them for conservation? But, now we can no longer take them out of the wild to provide better genetic stock for our breeders.”

I have to ask what does breeding rare birds have to do with conservation? Are the rare birds you breed going to be released back into the wild? It really hasn’t been done successfully up to this point. I understand the argument for breeding endangered animals in captivity to save the species from extinction. However, that argument is not nearly as strong as the one for saving animals in the wild. Now that’s conservation.

Let’s consider Hyacinth Macaws, a species close to my heart. There may be more Hyacinths in captivity than there are in the wild. They are certainly a species that many people claim to breed for conservation. So, when you breed a pair of Hyacinth Macaws what do you do with the progeny? You sell it either for a pet or to another breeder. How does this help the species? There are over 5,000 Hyacinth Macaws in captivity now, the species is saved. The gene pool is plenty big, no need to breed more to save the species. The California condor population of 150 birds had a base gene pool of only 28 birds to start from. The Leysian Teal population was down to one female and five eggs and is now in the hundreds. The need to breed Hyacinth Macaws to save the species probably doesn’t exist.

If you really want to do something to help save Hyacinth Macaws from extinction, and really practice conservation, I have a suggestion for you. When you sell your next Hyacinth chick for \$6,000 tack on another \$100 and put that money toward saving Hyacinths in the wild. I visited Brazil last May with the Kaytee Avian Foundation and Luanne and Richard Porter. We visited the project that Charlie Munn is heading up to save Hyacinths Macaws in the wild. The goal of the project is to raise money to purchase land where the Hyacinths breed and turn it over to a group that will manage it as a nature preserve. At \$15 per acre you can save a lot of nature with your \$100 donation. Luanne and Richard Porter supported the Hyacinth Macaw Project and this is a great opportunity for anyone who is serious about conservation to really make an impact on saving these beautiful birds. The Companion Bird Club in Minnesota donated over \$500 to this project. My company sold video tapes and T-shirts at a show we did in

in Texas and raised \$10,000 for the Hyacinths. Donating a portion of your bird sales to a project such as this is the perfect way for you really breed birds for conservation.

Conclusion

To properly understand a bird's behavior you should start by understanding the bird's natural instincts and behavior in the wild. Using this information as a guide you can avoid anthropomorphism and begin to develop a relationship with your bird that is based on mutual trust and respect. You will also develop new insights into what influences the behavior of your bird and find ways to shape desirable behavior through positive reinforcement.