

Getting in Touch with *Their* Feelings. Developing Sensitivity to Bird Behavior

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Introduction:

Trainers can achieve great success with their training goals by enhancing their ability to read and interpret bird behavior. Birds communicate using body language in very subtle ways. Trainers who develop sensitivity to this communication are more likely to understand the bird's motivation and thought process. In addition a sensitive trainer will also learn to adjust his or her behavior to create the most successful training environment possible. By identifying ways to improve sensitivity to bird behavior and common pitfalls to avoid, I hope to challenge trainers to challenge themselves to bring sensitivity to bird behavior to its highest level.

Defining Sensitivity to Bird Behavior, and Why it is Important:

Sensitivity to bird behavior is a trainer's ability to observe a bird's behavior, read and interpret this behavior to determine to the best of one's ability what the bird is thinking/feeling. The trainer can then adjust his or her own behavior to create a situation in which the bird can be as comfortable as possible, thus facilitating the bird performing the behavior the trainer is requesting. Ultimately, a trainer's success in requesting a bird to perform a behavior can depend on this. Good sensitivity allows the trainer to make a better choice as to what the trainer needs to do in order to facilitate the bird performing the behavior. By making a better choice/guess as to what the bird is thinking and how to respond, the result can be creating clearer communication between the bird and trainer. This can lead to faster response and quicker learning by the bird.

Good sensitivity can also lead to a better relationship between the bird and the trainer. If the trainer learns to understand behavior that communicates a bird is not comfortable with what the trainer is requesting, the trainer can learn to respond by not forcing the bird beyond its comfort level. (i.e. eliminate as much negative reinforcement as possible and focus on using positive reinforcement) This can allow the bird to have more positive experiences with that trainer and little or no negative experiences, and in turn, potentially be more likely to perform behaviors for that trainer. (For example: a bird that has its toe held to stay on your hand, versus one that is positively reinforced for staying there- may be more likely not to fly away from a trainer that positively reinforces it. In addition the bird may be more likely to fly back to that trainer in the event the bird flies off.) The significance of this can be great. One scenario I witnessed involved a macaw sitting in a tree that would not fly to a trainer that handles it everyday. However, when another trainer that has very limited contact with that bird, but is a trainer that demonstrates excellent sensitivity to behavior, calls the bird to come down. The bird does so right away. Obviously many factors could have contributed to that situation. But a possibility could be that the bird felt more comfortable with the trainer that had limited, but excellent interactions with the bird, rather than with the trainer with more, but lower "quality" interactions. Therefore, perhaps the choice to fly to someone with less positive reinforcement history has more to do with the quality of the interactions than the quantity, and again reinforces the benefit of developing good sensitivities to bird behavior.

How Birds Communicate:

Bird communication can consist of many components. Certainly, verbal communication exists. However, birds most often are communicating through body language. Some communications are very large and obvious. For example: A bird flying away due to fear. On the other hand, bird communication can also be incredibly subtle. Before the bird flew there were most likely a number of body movements that indicated the bird was likely to fly. Behaviors such as feathers slicking back, darting looks, and crouching or springing behavior. Even more subtle behavior was most likely also occurring even before that!

Two of the most important tools for communication in birds are their eyes. Bird telegraph much of what they are thinking by where, when and how they look at things. Paying close attention to eye behavior can give

give a trainer his or her best opportunity to understand what a bird may be thinking and therefore predict behavior to follow.

As trainers, we try to communicate with birds through the application of Operant Conditioning. We utilize cues, bridges, positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, etc. At least we believe that is how we are communicating. Although, we are using these tools, birds being the perceptive animals that they, are probably acutely aware of much more than what we “intentionally” are telling them. For example, many birds behave as if they know when they are next to perform a behavior in the show despite the absence of the “trained” cue. Birds also can learn that a motion from a trainers hand to the treats indicates they have performed the behavior correctly, even though the “trained” bridge is actually a whistle. Quite probably birds are reading and reacting to our body language far more than we are reading and reacting to theirs. By recognizing this, we can also learn to be more aware of our own actions and the effects it can have on bird behavior and training.

Improving Sensitivity to Bird Behavior:

With the understanding that sensitivity to bird behavior is important and that birds communicate with a variety of body language, we can now address ways to improve sensitivity. One of the most beneficial actions a trainer can do to increase sensitivity is to slow down! Slow down and allow for time to read and interpret the bird’s body language. A trainer can ask him or herself “*what is the bird thinking?*” Then ask again, is that what the trainer thinks the bird is thinking or is that REALLY what the bird is thinking? It is important to be really honest when asking this question. It can be easy for a trainer to apply an anthropomorphic interpretation to this question. If a trainer’s favorite bird is showing him or her aggression- it may hurt that individuals feelings, but the truth is the bird is showing aggression and if the trainer wants a better relationship with that bird, it is in the best interest of the trainer to recognize and accept the bird is showing aggression and respond in a way to improve that situation.

It is also helpful to recognize that the bird probably doesn’t care about the trainer’s feelings. The bird is most likely concerned with what is important to itself. Birds probably don’t perform behaviors to make trainers happy. They do them to make themselves “happy” or satiated, or comfortable, etc. We hopefully facilitate making them happy through good training and sensitivity.

When a trainer intends on interacting with a bird, even in the most routine ways, weighing, picking up, etc. sensitivity can be improved by focusing attention at the task at hand. Focus on reading the bird’s behavior and adjusting trainer behavior. Focus on being sensitive. It is important for the trainer to never forget when he or she has a bird on his or her hand or glove. It is easy to get distracted by conversation, activity, etc. However, staying in touch with the bird can make even this seemingly basic interaction more successful.

Every interaction counts. Every interaction is a learning experience for that bird (and the trainer). Every interaction can affect the relationship between the bird and the trainer. A better quality interaction because the trainer is focused can lead to a better relationship and better odds of good behavior from the bird. It is much like “tunnel vision”, as the trainer enters into the interaction. The trainer’s world becomes small as he or she focuses on the interaction.

On the flipside, it is important to remember to not lose sight of the big picture. Even if the trainer is not intentionally interacting with a bird- if the bird is aware of the trainer’s presence, he or she is affecting his or her relationship with that bird. Territorial behaviors can start way before trainers get close to the bird. Ignoring these behaviors can have serious repercussions.

It is also important to be aware of environmental distractions. Food cups laying about may cause a bird to fly to the familiar conditioned reinforcer. A higher perch nearby may be an appealing place for a bird to perch even though the trainer would like the bird to stay on his or her hand. In these situations trainers must be aware of the surroundings and adjust accordingly. Perhaps the trainer blocks the birds view of the perch or food cup with their own body. The trainer could also positively reinforce the bird for staying on the hand, when they may not normally do so. Birds may also be startled or nervous of environmental factors. Again it is the trainer’s responsibility to notice this behavior and expect to need to adjust.

When working a bird on stage, a trainer can be focused on many different things, dialog, the audience, environmental distractions as well as bird behaviors. It is an important challenge for a trainer to learn to think about many things at once onstage. However, it is important that the trainer never lose touch with the bird.

Hopefully a trainer is continuously observing, interpreting and adjusting to bird behavior while on stage. As stated before every interaction is training and can effect the bird/trainer relationship. Certainly working a bird in the show is one big training session.

With birds, small things count a lot. A trainer's small movements can be big to the bird. In addition, the bird's small movements, to a sensitive trainer, are also big. Think about the reaction one can get just by *looking* at an aggressive hawk. The slightest movement of a trainer's hand can be interpreted as a cue to a bird. For a parrot, a hand moving to go into a pocket for a treat could bridge a behavior and end it right there. Birds are incredibly perceptive. It is important for trainers to challenge themselves to be as perceptive about how *their* behavior is affecting the bird's behavior. Trainers can look for small changes in bird body language to cue themselves something is going on that is effecting the bird's behavior. Certainly many trainers have had a bird stop performing a behavior and look up. The trainer looks to see what the bird sees and there is a little tiny speck of an eagle soaring overhead. But trainers also need to focus on even smaller behavior changes. A simple quick look with the eyes to one side may mean the bird is looking for an escape path and is ready to take off. Trainers often say in retrospect "I knew I should not have asked for that last repetition!" After the bird flies away, trainers then recall all the behaviors/body language the bird showed that indicated it was at the end of its attention span for the session.

Use as little or no negative reinforcement as possible. This sounds self-explanatory. However, many trainers do not take this to the highest level. Birds can be relatively small non-threatening animals. It can be very easy for people to physically overpower, physically manipulate or force a bird to do something without serious repercussions to the people (relatively speaking) It is pretty easy to make a tethered hawk get onto your glove. However, a greater challenge is for the trainer to either use positive reinforcement or as little negative reinforcement as possible to get the hawk on the glove. This again requires the trainer to use excellent sensitivity to bird behavior skills. The steps to this could be for the trainer, from 20 ft back, observe the bird's behavior, read and interpret and react accordingly to help create a situation in which the bird is as comfortable as possible. This may mean crouching down. It may mean avoiding eye contact. And/or it may mean approaching with food. The idea is that the hawk should sit comfortably and not try to bate away from the trainer. If the bird shows body language that it is nervous, the trainer reassesses and adjusts again. This reading and readjusting occurs through the whole process of picking up the bird. Keeping in mind the goal is for the trainer to try by his or her behavior to keep the bird as comfortable as possible while accomplishing the goal of getting the bird on the fist. Again in the long run it can create a better working relationship between the trainer and the bird. The goal is to ask or allow a bird to perform a behavior, rather than expect or force a bird to perform a behavior.

Treat every interaction as if it was the first time it has happened. Because a bird has always stepped up onto a trainer's hand, it is not necessarily going to today. Animals, just as people are not robots. It is unfair of us to assume every interaction will be the same. Again it is a more sensitive trainer that takes the time to read every situation before proceeding. And again in the long term it can affect the trainer/bird relationship and the bird's response to that individuals training practices.

Positive reinforcement can be a trainer's best friend. Negative reinforcement is a part of animal lives in nature and in captive situations. However, unless it is a better choice (for example in some dangerous or aggressive interactions) for a situation, positive reinforcement can better help a trainer to accomplish the goals of better working relationship and at the same time allow the trainer to reach his or her training goals. Negative reinforcement involves making a bird do something. Positive reinforcement is about allowing and/or asking a bird to do something. Even though bird trainers have traditionally utilized negative reinforcement for some components of training, there is the potential for even greater success using positive reinforcement or reducing the level of negative reinforcement as much as possible.

Examples of Heightened Sensitivity to Bird Behavior:

Understanding the theory behind the suggestions to help develop sensitivity to bird behavior is important. However, it can be difficult to conceptualize. The following is a list of examples in which a trainer can apply sensitivity to bird behavior and potentially see results in the form of a better bird/trainer relationship and better performance of behavior.

- Picking up a bird – the bird willingly steps onto the trainer’s hand for positive reinforcement and little or no negative reinforcement.
- Moving birds in crates is as smooth and steady as it can possibly be.
- Birds leave a trainers hand or perch willingly to fly. It is not necessary to launch a bird into flight. The bird has control and choice in the matter.
- Birds tails never touch or hit anything. Most birds do not like their tails to touch things.
- Birds fly or sit facing into the wind or in a crosswind. It can be very challenging for a bird to control flight in a tailwind and therefore potentially not a positive experience for the bird.
- Requested flight patterns are species appropriate. Different species are unable or uncomfortable flying in certain ways. Perhaps the flight angle is too steep for the species, or the distance is too far.
- The creance is meant to go unnoticed by the bird for the most part. Therefore birds are able to fly at will, not pulled into flight. They are also gently lowered to ground if necessary.
- Birds do not experience food anxiety from observation of other birds eating or by viewing conditioned reinforcers such as food bowls or crates when not being fed.
- Birds are not “accidentally” frightened by strange objects. Trainers are careful when bringing/moving items near birds that might scare or startle them.
- Trainers allow birds time to desensitize to a new environment, new person, object etc., rather than expect perfect performance in a new situation right away.
- Bating is considered avoidable and unacceptable. Trainers strive to avoid bating.
- Birds are not asked to fly in a situation in which they will hit their wings on things.
- Birds are not forced off the hand if they won’t get on a perch. Trainers focus on training the behavior with positive reinforcement.
- Trainers do not push a hawk’s tail to get it to turn around on the glove.
- Trainers do not drop a bird or wiggle it while on the glove to get it to put it’s wings out.
- Many more.

Conclusion:

Many of us are in the profession of bird training due to a great love and respect for birds. It is our responsibility to provide the animals we steward with the best environment we possibly can, while accomplishing the goal of inspiring others to care for wildlife. Taking our sensitivity to bird behavior to its highest level is an important factor in creating that environment. I hope everyone is inspired to take the time to get in touch with *their* (the bird’s) feelings.