

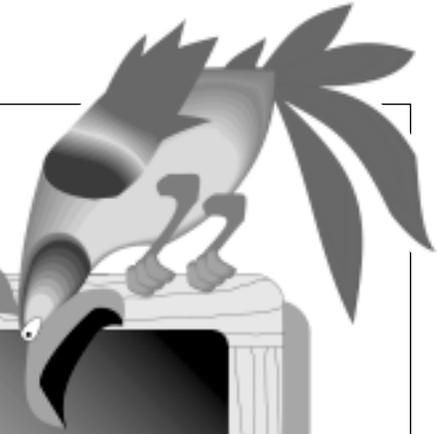


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# Chapter 1

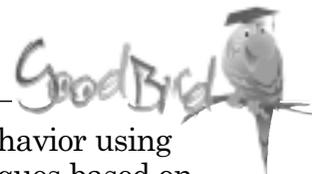
## Introduction



Parrots can be some of the most rewarding pets with which to share your life. On the other hand they can also be one of the most frustrating creatures to have in your house! In most cases, parrots exhibit some relatively natural behavior in our homes. Some of these behaviors endear them to us, such as mimicking sounds or preening our hair. However, some other behaviors are absolutely no fun for us at all. These behaviors include screaming and biting, among others.

As a companion parrot owner of 16 years and a professional bird trainer since 1990, I have had the opportunity to meet many parrots and companion parrot owners and witness a great deal of parrot behavior. Over and over again companion parrot owners seek advice for the same, seemingly out of control behavioral problems. The good news is that there are solutions to these problems. The solutions are based on training using positive reinforcement (associating treats or rewards with desired behavior).

## Introduction



Training is really a form of teaching. The subject learns when the trainer positively reinforces (or rewards) each small step the subject takes towards the desired behavior. Using the principles described in training, it becomes easy to teach birds, as well as people,

what is the desired response. The beauty of training using positive reinforcement is that it works! In addition, it allows a companion parrot owner to have the best relationship possible with his or her bird.

In this book I have described some typical problem behavior scenarios experienced by companion parrot owners. I have provided an explanation as to why the behavior may be occurring and offered a step-by-step explanation of how to address

the problem behavior using training techniques based on positive reinforcement. If applied correctly, these strategies work. After picking a treat to use as positive reinforcement for your bird and learning about reading bird behavior, feel free to jump ahead to the chapter

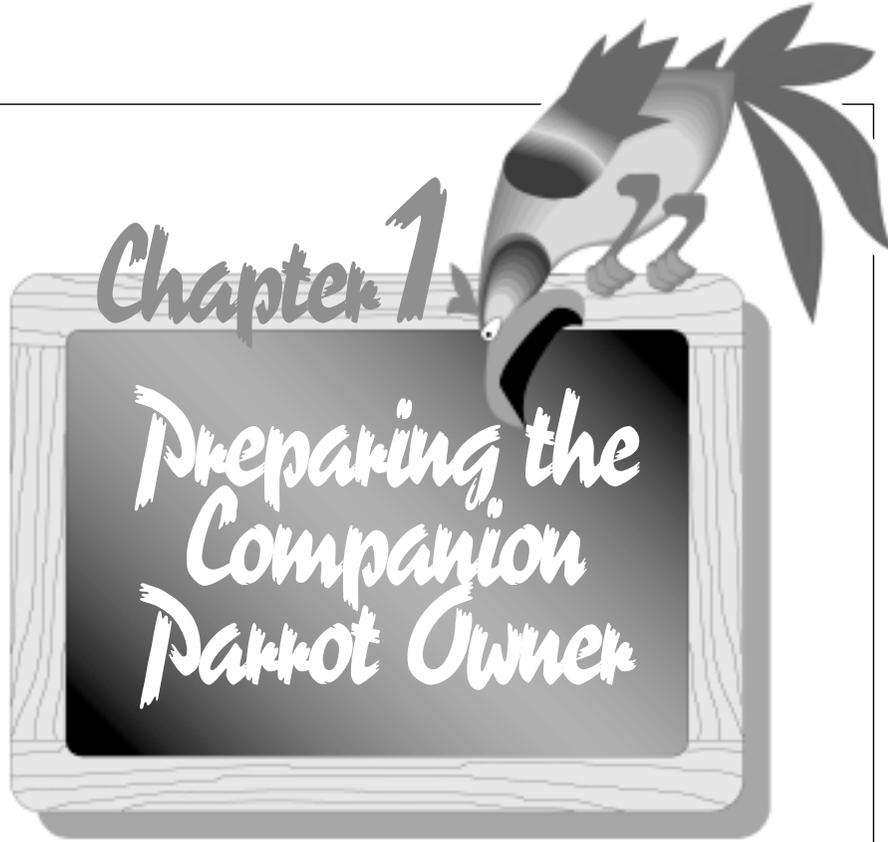


*Scarlet Macaw*

that most pertains to the specific behavioral problem in which you have an interest.

Over the years, I have worked with a number

of birds. However, like most companion parrots owners, I am most fond and familiar with my own blue fronted Amazon parrot. He was an unwanted bird, placed in my home for temporary care that has since turned into 16 years. In the beginning he screamed loudly, was known to bite and was not all that interested in interacting



**Picking a treat to use as positive reinforcement**

In order to offer positive reinforcement or a reward to your bird, it is important to find something your bird really likes. Some birds like head scratches and attention as a reward. However, most birds will respond well to a



*Sometimes a scratch on the head can be used as positive reinforcement.*

food treat as a reward.

An easy way to identify food treats for your own bird is to offer your bird his normal diet and observe what food item he eats first. This is typically your bird's favorite food item. This food item can then be removed from the diet and saved for training purposes

only. By doing this, your bird will still get the food item, but only for doing desired behavior. Many parrots prefer sunflower seeds, safflower seeds, grapes, banana, corn, peanuts, and other nuts. The seeds are easy to use due to their compact size. If larger food items are chosen, it is recommended those items are either cut or broken into smaller pieces. This allows more opportunities to give your bird a treat for desired behavior before he gets full and no longer has an interest in the treat. Seeds, corn, peas and other small items are usually a good size. However grapes, banana, peanuts and other nuts should be cut or broken into smaller pieces. Avoid using items that are unhealthy for

your parrot. High fat items, such as nuts, should be broken into small pieces and used in moderation. I typically use a low oil sunflower seed (grey or sometimes called white stripe-usually available in feed stores), fruits and vegetables and parrot pellets.



*Clockwise from top left: Pieces of peanut, grey stripe sunflower seeds, mixed vegetables, pieces of grape.*



*This African Grey Parrot shows body language that indicates he does not enjoy being touched in this manner at the moment.*

In order for a treat to be positively reinforcing your bird has to want the treat. If your bird refuses the treat or drops it when offered, try a different treat or try to conduct your session at another time when your bird may have an interest in what is offered. It is especially important when head scratches, toys or attention are used as rewards that your bird

given. At this point you stop giving a reward when your bird offers the behavior without the cue. Pretty soon your bird will perform the behavior when you give the cue. Keep in mind you need to ignore (not reward) the behavior

if he offers it without being cued first at this point or it will not be clear to him that the behavior must be performed after the cue in order to get the reward.

Now when you have dinner, you can cue your bird to perform his behavior on cue and give him his treat for that instead of screaming.



*A hand cue tells this Citron Cockatoo to raise his crest and he will get a treat.*

### Scenario 4:

*It is early morning and everyone is asleep, except your bird, who is screaming his head off.*

*Why does this happen?*

In the wild it is typical for parrots to be rather raucous in the morning and the evening. These calls can be about bringing the flock together, defining territory and/or an expres-

sion of well-being. Therefore, it is probably a good healthy sign if your bird is noisy in the morning, although not much fun for you.

*What can you do?*

1. Use a mild form of negative reinforcement, not associated with you.



*Detailed explanation:*

1. Use a mild form of negative reinforcement, not associated with you.

In this situation you want your bird to learn that screaming creates an unpleasant circumstance. This is one occasion in which mild negative reinforcement may be considered as an option. However, it is essential that the negative reinforcement not be associated with you. Usually things that companion parrot owners have been told to do in the past aren't successful (spray bird with water, cover cage, etc.). This is because those things usually involve the companion parrot owner directly and occur well after the scream started. In addition, to some birds, these things are great fun. A more successful approach would be when your bird screams, immediately your bird would experience a mild deterrent that appears to have been caused by your birds own screaming, not by you entering the room.

One family I know had a very loud Umbrella Cockatoo that lived in a renovated garage. The garage was absolutely gorgeous. It was brightly light. It had central heat and air conditioning. It

was also elaborately decorated with plants and parrot toys and jungle gyms. And people spent a great deal of time in the area. The garage door was opened on days when the weather was nice to allow natural sunlight and fresh air to circulate. However, the door was opened by pushing a remote control. Therefore, when the door opened it startled the bird, unless someone was standing by his cage to help prepare the bird for the surprise of the door opening. On the other hand, this became a powerful tool to help discourage screaming. Whenever the bird started screaming inappropriately, all the owner had to do was push the remote control garage door opener. Soon the bird learned screaming would cause the garage door to move and therefore discontinued his screaming. ❄️