



Avian Positive Reinforcement Training

Positive reinforcement training is a technique used with all kinds of animals. When an animal does what it is asked to do, it is rewarded. The reward, initially, is food, but toys and play can also be rewards. Unfortunately, many parrots have abundant amounts of

rich food in front of them 24 hours a day. An overfed bird is not motivated by food so implementing a proper diet is the first step. Typical interactions with pet birds, such as petting and cuddling, stimulate them hormonally but do little to

stimulate their brains. Training can be an extremely useful tool for teaching behaviors necessary for a pet bird's care or to make stressful events less stressful. Giving our birds challenges makes them smarter, more confident, and happier.

CREATING AN EAGER STUDENT

- Start a foraging program (see Foraging handout).
- Limit the favorite food to a small quantity and use it only for training.
- Break up the food to be used as a reward into small morsels (1/4 inch or less).
- Take away all food for about 1-2 hours before training sessions.
- Stop sessions before the bird loses interest in the treats.



DEFINITIONS

CUE: a signal given to the subject that tells what behavior is desired. It can be *verbal* (e.g. "step up") or with *hand signals*.

TARGET: an object that the subject is taught to touch to get a reward. The target is often the trainer's hand.

SHAPING: working through progressive approximations of the desired behavior

BRIDGE: a signal that the desired behavior was performed and that a reward is forthcoming such as a *clicker* or *verbal response* (e.g. "good")

REWARD: a tangible reward for the performance of a behavior including *food treats* or *praise*.

JACKPOT: an especially large or desirable reward for completion of a complicated behavior, or one that the bird was initially very reluctant to perform.

PROCESS

- Give the cue for the behavior to be taught.
- Use the target to guide the subject to do the behavior, or at least an approximation of it.
- Once the behavior or the approximation is performed use the bridge to mark it.
- Give a reward.
- Repeat. As the pupil progresses, require a better performance before bridging and rewarding.
- Use a jackpot to reward a particularly big jump in progress.



SPECIFIC TRAINING EXAMPLES

You can use your own creativity to teach any number of behaviors. The bird should first be trained to step up and down well and has reasonably good trust in the owner. The examples given here are some useful behaviors and they provide a framework you can use to train other behaviors. Some behaviors can be taught in one session, while others may take numerous sessions. It depends heavily on the complexity of the behavior, the reluctance of the bird to perform the behavior, and how motivated the bird is for the reward.

TOWEL TOLERANCE

This is one that has a lot of useful applications, and also one that many birds are initially very reluctant to learn. Therefore, a stronger motivation must be used to overcome this reluctance.

Depending on the current level of fear that the bird has for towels, this process may take a week, or it may take months.

The *cue* in this case is just the towel. Start with the towel over the lap of the handler. With the bird on the hand, first have the bird step down on the towel. This will be very easy in most cases, unless the bird is extremely afraid of towels already. When the bird steps down on the towel, say, "good!" (*bridge*) and give the *reward*. Repeat until this is very easy and comfortable for the bird.

Next, with the bird on the towel, take a corner of the towel, and offer it to the bird to touch with

the beak. If the bird touches the towel, or simply sits calmly while the towel is touched to the beak. *Bridge* and *reward*. Repeat this step until the bird is very comfortable with it.

The next step starts the same, stroke the bird with the corner of the towel. Start just stroking the top of the head. *Bridge* and *reward*. Work up to stroking down the back. *Bridge* and *reward*. Again, continue this step until the bird is very comfortable with it.

Next, take a larger section of the towel, and lay it briefly on the bird's back. *Bridge* and *reward*. Repeat until comfortable. Increase the time that the towel sits on the back. *Bridge* and *reward*. Repeat until comfortable.

Next, tuck the towel under the bird's sides. *Bridge* and *reward*. Repeat until comfortable. Continue

to tuck more under the sides until the bird is essentially wrapped in the towel, burrito style.

Next, pick up the wrapped bird. Give a *jackpot* for this step. The bird has learned the whole behavior now. The lessons should be

repeated at least twice weekly to maintain. It is helpful to try

generalizing this behavior to other people and places by practicing in different environments and by handing the wrapped bird to other people. Always reward good behavior.



Note: nearly the same sequence can be used to teach a bird to tolerate a harness and leash.

WAVE

This one is more for fun than anything else, but can be useful for looking at the feet or for counter conditioning. This is a pretty simple behavior, especially for birds that know "step up".

Choose a *cue*, such as the word "wave". Give the *cue*, then bring a hand toward the bird as though you are going to have the bird step up. When the bird lifts a foot, *bridge* and *reward* the behavior.

Repeat until the foot comes up without bringing the hand forward.

For an interesting twist, you can teach them to wave the other foot. Once you have taught "wave", start again, using a *cue* of "other foot" or anything distinct from the original. Bring the hand in from the side opposite the one your bird usually waves with. Most parrots are left footed. It may take a little longer to teach them to lift the right foot. Once it lifts, *bridge* and



reward. Repeat until the foot lifts without advancing the hand.

For a more useful twist, try to continue shaping the behavior until you can touch, then hold the feet. You can even continue until you can file the nails with an emery board.

TRAINING EXAMPLES (CONTINUED)

FLIGHT TO THE HAND

This behavior is one that every falconer teaches to their birds.

While many pet birds have their wings trimmed to limit flight, some owners prefer to let them have full flight. There certainly are benefits to this (cardiovascular fitness, weight control, better balance, etc.), but it can be risky (escapes, flying into objects) at times. It also gives the bird an added means of controlling or avoiding interactions with the owner. So, if a bird is to be fully flighted, this behavior should be important.

The *cue* can be any word, a whistle, or just a tap on the hand



you want the bird to land on. Start out with the bird on a perch. It helps if they have been trained to “stay” on a perch already. At first, just hold the hand a few inches from the perch. With the other hand (*target*), show the food treat. When the bird steps or hops onto the hand, say “good” (*bridge*) and give the treat (*reward*). Repeat this until the bird responds immediately and quickly to the cue. Then the hand is moved back a little further, and the whole process is repeated.

Wait until each step is accomplished consistently well before moving to the next step.

Eventually, the bird may be flying across the room or house to the hand. Once the behavior is well trained, it is helpful if training can be done in other locations to generalize the behavior.

Not only does this behavior provide a means of gaining some control of the bird’s behavior, it also is a great way to provide physical activity. In the event of an escape, the chances of the bird returning to the owner are much better.

Note: for wing-trimmed birds, this behavior can be taught as well. Depending on the wing trim, they can flap, glide, hop, walk, or climb to the hand instead of flying.

STATIONING

Stationing is a behavior that involves simply having an animal go to a particular spot or station and stay there. The station can be placed on a scale, or any other location that serves a useful purpose. This is a very versatile behavior. This is particularly helpful for birds that are not easily handled.

For example, some birds that are territorial about the cage and will aggressively attack people’s hands when they try to clean the cage.



By stationing the bird on a perch prior to working on the cage, the situation can be avoided. This behavior can also be useful to when you need to monitor your bird’s weight.

The first thing to do is to choose a station. It can be a perch, a table, or any other object that is easy for the bird to stand upon. Choose a *cue*.

In the early phases, just give the *cue*, place the bird upon it. *Bridge* and *reward*. Repeat until the bird steps easily onto the chosen station. In the next

phase, give the *cue*, put the bird a short distance from the station, and wait until the bird moves over and steps onto the station. If there is hesitation, guide the bird to the station with the hand holding the treat (*target*). *Bridge* and *reward*. Gradually move the station further from the bird. *Bridge* and *reward* each successive completion. Eventually, place the station outside of the open cage and give the *cue* to station. Guide the bird to the station if necessary. *Bridge* and *reward*. Repeat until the behavior is automatic and consistent.

