



Alan M Fudge, DVM, Diplomate ABVP-Avian Practice

Bird Doctor Housecalls 933-BIRD

PO Box 5647, El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

www.birddoctorhousecalls.com

Tel 916-933-2473 Fax 916-405-3376

Clicker Training- Owner Shaped Positive Reinforcement

Clicker Training-Background

Clicker training has long been used by professional animal trainers for performances (marine mammal, circus, bird acts), by canine obedience, agility and conformation enthusiasts.

Clicker Training-Pet Avians

Clicker training can help encourage desired behavior, reduce fear and anxiety and provide emotional and physical outlets for our avian family members.

Clicker Training Basics

The process is straightforward- identify or encourage a behavior, mark the behavior (clicker), positively reinforce (treat or other reward), finally continue to shape.

Academics refer to this as Operant Conditioning (Skinner)

Birds that can be trained

Just about any psittacine species can benefit from this exercise. Species reportedly trained also include doves chickens, crows, ducks, emus, kookaburras, hawks, vultures, owls, starlings and penguins

Benefits of Clicker Training

Avian trainers and behaviorists vary in their approach towards shaping bird behavior.... but...

Bird Owners and Behavior

Commonly captive-reared psittacines are brilliant at training their owners to suit their needs, rapidly learning to reinforce owner behavior.

This pattern of interaction may lead to reinforcement of culturally undesirable behavior patterns in the companion avian

Undesirable Behavior Patterns

Feather/skin damaging behavior

Biting

Screaming

Unwanted egg-laying in the single pet female

Client Communication

Clicker training can provide an aid to teach your bird anything he or she is mentally and physically capable of learning
Clinically, clicker training may help reduce problem behaviors.

Classical Conditioning

Animals can learn to associate one seemingly unrelated thing with another, as a survival skill.

My parrots associate boiling pasta as a likely future treat

Another common example is the cat responding to the sound of a can opener.

Operant Conditioning

Operant conditioning happens when an animal performs a behavior and then learns the consequences of its behavior. Consequences:

Positive reinforcement (goal of clicker training)

Punishment (often ineffective or worse in birds)

No consequence

Extinction

Behavior that is not rewarded may fade away (unless the bird get his own jollies from it) by a process called extinction

Example- an adopted parrot with profane language will lose the language over time if not reinforced.

Benefits-Positive Reinforcement

Reinforced behaviors tend to increase in frequency, intensity, and duration

The Plan: focus on the positive hopefully with a happier bird and owner

Undesirable behavior, such as biting and screaming can tend to fade away

Before Starting

Review and optimize nutritional, health, environmental, and husbandry concerns

Compliance on general care is important

Owners unwilling to take care of basics probably won't be motivated to proceed to clicker training or other behavioral efforts

Wing clipping is a good idea before beginning a training program

Age of Patient

Young birds should be weaned before clicker training

Trainers advocate that you don't have to wait to start with a new adult bird coming into the home because the method is a great way to build trust.

Older birds can easily be clicker-trained

Owner Motivation

The exercise can be easily performed by a motivated child

Owner motivation may well be based on the fun of teaching tricks

The veterinarian may find this useful for helping serious behavior problems

Daily Routine

Plan on starting with only 3-5 minutes a day, working up to twenty minutes if all is going well.

Experienced trainers advocating keeping a journal of your training sessions.

Treats

“Paying” your companion after signaling (clicker) at the precise time the desired behavior is performed.

Take the time to identify specially desired treats.

Consider the overall nutritional program- these treats may be items that the parrot only gets while “working.”

Establish what is always a hit and what can be consumed with little fanfare.

We don’t want to “take five” every time you pay your performer.

Non-Food Rewards

Some birds aren’t motivated by treats.

Other birds don’t need the calories (for example an obese budgie).

Non-food treats can include verbal rewards or physical rewards, such as head rubbing.

Basic Training Plan

1. Get the behavior
2. Mark the behavior with a cue
3. Reinforce the behavior
4. Refine the behavior
5. Add a cue

Getting the Behavior

Capturing is simply marking and rewarding a natural behavior- the easiest of them all

Modeling

Show your bird how something is done. Some parrots will enjoy learning by watching.

Luring

Luring involves the use of a “target.”

For parrots, a chopstick is convenient. Consider the target as a cue or a pointer to help hint an already motivated subject.

Targeting

The goal is to get your bird to reach for but not bite the object that you are using (I prefer a chopstick).

Click at the moment the bird reaches out to touch the target; reward.

Other Behaviors

Stepping on Hand or Wrist

Climbing a Ladder

Ringing a Bell

Teaching Manners

References and Resources

Internet

www.clickertraining.com -source of clicker training books seminars, and supplies for birds, dogs and other species

www.naturalencounters.com Bird Trainer Steve Martin's website

www.hsnp.com/behavior Bob Bailey's chicken-training workshops

References and Resources

Books

Johnson, Melinda, Clicker Training for Birds, Sunshine Books, 2004, Waltham MA

(recommended and available from <http://www.clickertraining.com>)

Melinda co-hosts a listserve Bird Click (receive an email digest of member discussions) <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Bird-Click/>; downloadable guides.

Books

Morrow, Linda, Clicking with Birds, 2002 (recommended and available from her website): <http://community-2.webtv.net/Lincomacaws/ClickingwithBirds/>). Linda's website has downloadable resource guides in addition to her book for sale.

Linda also maintains a listserve-
<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/clickbirds/>