

The Bird School

Clicker Training

Ann M. Castro

Also Covering:

**Flighted
Birds and
Taming**



for Parrots and Other Birds AdIA

Ann Castro

The Bird School

Clicker Training for
Parrots and Other Birds

Readers' Opinions

A Must Read for All Bird Owners!

It is very informative and beautifully written. It will guide anyone to the clicker way of training. I suggest it for anyone with parrots. After my first session with my bird it was working great! At last, something to read, something to do for your bird/parrot that really works.
– Tammie Thomas

A “Must” for Every Bird Person!!

Beautifully written and presented, Castro's book “The bird school: Clicker training for parrots and other birds” is exactly what I have been desiring for the avian community! She walks the reader through step by step, explaining the importance of behavior and bird individuality, all the way through to how to form a fun and trusting relationship and train our avian companions to do tricks. This is a book that I will send home with every bird that I adopt out and highly recommend to all of my customers and clients! This book should be a “must” on every bird person's list! – Andrea Fahy

The Best Bird Clicker Training Book Available.

Whether you're interested in getting into clicker training or an experienced trainer, I highly recommend this book. It explains the basics clearly and concisely, and presents many very useful behaviors with step-by-step

training plans for how to teach them to your birds. Ann Castro works with a wide range of parrots, from tiny budgies and parrotlets to African greys and the largest macaws. Castro focuses on truly useful behaviors like stepping up and “drop it.”

She also discusses how to deal with problem behaviors in a gentle and effective way. If you’re only going to buy one book on clicker training parrots, make it this one!
– C. Moore

Fantastic

I’ve really enjoyed using clicker training as a means to interact with my birds. It’s simple, easy, and fun. The birds are surprisingly VERY into it. If I have both of my parrotlets out at the same time they will compete to see who can get to the clicker stick first, knowing that a treat is about to follow. I highly recommend this book and training method to any bird owner, regardless of type of bird, level of training, or age. – Holly J.

Awesome!!

This book is a must have for bird owners easy to read step by step how to. I have clicker training for dogs and cats. Any this is way far the best book. – Lisa Dunne

Very Thorough

Ann is a very dedicated writer on the parrot ownership topic. She’s methodical in her explanation on

companion parrots and their training. If you really care about having a close relationship with your pet bird, this book might be your answer. – N.N.

Awesome!

This is the first book I purchased when I got my African Grey Parrot! It is very helpful & really made training make sense to a novice. A few years later, and I still refer back to this book! Easy to understand. – Loretta N.

A Must-Have Text and Reference for Any Bird Owner!

Great training for the owner, as well as, the pet bird. Well thought out and presented. Easy to follow, well paced approaches to basic training and a wake-up call for those of us who's been around birds all our lives. Ann Castro breaks down birds' psychological behaviors and shows you great ways to work with them so that you and your bird are both happy! I've owned pet birds for over 40 years and was amazed at the answers I got from this book. Thanks Ann, a book long overdue!
– W. Veach

Fun for Parakeet Owners, a Must for Parrot Owners!

I have seen clicker training with dogs, monkeys and even rabbits. But I was skeptical that a small bird could actually be trained.

I was wrong! My two budgies are completely different in personality, and clicker training works for both.

Schnappi caught on very fast. She learnt to follow the target stick right away und does tricks now, like riding her own little skateboard. My second bird Snoopy spent time outside before I got her and is afraid of her own shadow. With clicker training she started enjoying life again. She learnt fast what the „click“ means and has fewer panic attacks. Soon, she'll be ready for the target stick. Now I can actually „do something“ with my birds rather than just talk to them.

The step-by-step instructions in „The Bird School“ by Ann Castro are very easy to follow, and the pictures are worth „a thousand words.“ But reading the book also brought back sad memories. Years ago, I had a friend who always showed up with bite marks on her arms, inflicted by her own parrot. I found the explanation in the „Bird School“: The bird was lonely and bored. The punishment for biting (screaming and yelling) was his reward, and that's why it never stopped. I wish a book like this had been available then! Clicker training is a fun activity for budgies and other small birds. For parrots, clicker training is even more important to socialize them and make life enjoyable for birds and owners alike.. – Sigrid Rhodes

Awesome!!

This book is a must have for bird owners. It is an easy to read step by step how to. I have clicker training for dogs and cats. Any this is by far the best book. – Lisa Dunne

Ann Castro

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Parrots and Other Birds

AdIA Papageienhilfe gGmbH

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AdLA Papageienhilfe gGmbH

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for Nikita

Our Stars

The birds shown in this book are mainly those belonging to our rescue organization AdLA Papageienhilfe gGmbH.

Some show the damage done to them, some don't. We have decided to purposely show also those animals that do not look perfect. They represent the many parrots and other birds that still suffer a sorry life due to poor or inappropriate keeping, as well as mental and physical abuse.

Our respect is given to those animals who, in spite of their pasts, find the courage to trust again, to learn new things and in turn to become teachers for us humans, but also to new additions to our flock.

Thank You

I would like to thank all the birds big and small, their owners, veterinarians, breeders and rescuers for allowing me to learn from them.

My thanks also goes to the ann's world team for their friendship and active, never-tiring support. My special thanks go to the photographer David Jayne who donated many photos for this book, as well as all others who kindly donated their time and photographs for this project.

Last, but not least, I would like to warmly thank my readers who have made the print version of this book such an overwhelming success.

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Photo: Ann Castro
Clicker training may be used to improve the quality of life for handicapped animals.



Photo: Antje Bittner
Even an entire flock of flighted birds may be trained and kept busy with clicker training.

1. Preamble

As a child, I had a budgie which I never managed to tame.

The instruction to hold my hand into her cage and to wait, until the bird would hop onto it on its own accord, was too difficult for this child's patience. Pretty soon I was bored with the budgie and my mother ended up taking care of it. My elder sister was similarly luckless in her attempts to tame her bird. She too gave it to our mother.

As my bird was a female and my sister's a male – the inevitable soon happened. My mother became at first an unwilling and then an increasingly enthusiastic breeder. But one thing set her apart from the other breeders. There was always a run on her chicks, while other people



Photo: David Jayne
Like all parrots, Tina smells delicious under her wings.

had a hard time finding new homes for their babies. What was the secret of her success? Right from the day of hatching, my mother occupied herself with the little ones, under the tolerant eyes of the parent birds who did all the raising work. Thus by the time she sought homes for the babies, they were already super tame. And everyone wanted one of her birds.

The charm of having a tame bird has survived to this day. Unfortunately, the methods of accomplishing such tameness are often the same as thirty years ago and usually similarly unsuccessful. The advice that is given to deal with unwanted behavior is at best useless. At worst, it even reinforces the unwanted behavior.

Recommendations are for example, to scream louder than the bird, to cover his cage, to squirt him with water or even to slap his beak. These kinds of measures are supposed to lead the bird to trust me, its keeper? To me, at the least, those methods are unloving and without respect for the living being in our care. Some of the recommendations are even cruel and have animal welfare relevancy.

When I finally bought my first parrot as an adult after years of study and career induced parrot abstinence, I was frustrated and disappointed. The “sweet” little bird that had been marketed to me as a super tame hand raised bird was terrified of hands and showed his displeasure through hefty bites. I read every book I could lay my hands on. However, the methods for training described in these books just did not “feel” right. Until, I discovered a comment about clicker training in one of the books. This is a Training Method that works exclusively with positive reinforcement of desired behavior. I had read about such methods in management literature and was enthusiastic to try it out on my parrot. But sadly, I had been excited too early. It was impossible to obtain a book in English, German, or any other language for that matter, on clicker training with birds.



Photo: David Jayne
A lot of trust is required, before your bird will lie on his back in your hand like Jack, one of my greenwing macaws.

Undaunted, I found myself a clicker trainer for dogs and talked him into giving it a try with my parrots (meanwhile, little Hector had gotten a mate). The result was less than convincing. The trainer knew how to clicker train – but, only with dogs. The problem we were facing was that dogs are hunters, parrots however are – “dinner”. This results in completely different behaviors which means that the training of parrots must be structured differently.

Frustrated again, I searched the internet some more and signed up with several mailing lists for parrots. On some of these mailing lists professional animal trainers participated and discussed their training issues. Thus, I became

Clicker Training for Parrots and Other Birds



Photo: David Jayne
Hector entertains himself playing the hat game – learned with clicker training.

acquainted with trainers of birds for flight shows in zoos, animal parks and the like who without exception utilized positive reinforcement methods for their training purposes.

What a breakthrough! A new world seemed to open up for me. Nothing was impossible. The animal was not a “stubborn beast”, but my training partner with whom I had to communicate. This attitude alone makes a huge difference in training. Trainers who view the animals as their partners, will not attempt to increase the intensity of the Training Method when an exercise does not work. They do not get angry or increasingly impatient which only makes the situation worse and hinders learning

even more. Trainers with this kind of attitude take a step back and think about why the animal does not understand them. And then they think about what they can do to help the animal toward its learning success. These trainers want to make it easy for the animal to be successful. The bird is their friend and partner, not their adversary. If one does not advance through the front door in a training situation, one tries going through the back door instead or even through a window, always remaining calm and friendly towards the animal and reinforcing wanted behaviors. What a discovery! After I had learned this philosophy, everything became so easy. One of my parrots needed to be taken to the vet? No problem. I simply grabbed the clicker and quickly taught him to go into his carrier. A bird refused to eat his very-healthy-and-good-for-you-broccoli? No problem. This too was easily trained. It was so much fun!

In the mornings, while putting on my make-up, I had the two African greys, Hector and Lily, besides me learning handshakes and high fives somewhere between lipstick and mascara. In the evenings, in front of the TV, one of my macaws (my flock had expanded significantly by then) learned to retrieve. And my lovebirds played “soccer” on the dining room table. Of

Clicker Training for Parrots and Other Birds



course, I could not keep our successes and the fun we were having to myself. And so I started reporting and giving tips to other bird owners in Germany's largest online message board for birds.

Eventually the board's owner created an extra clicker sub-board for us. During the following years, this board expanded steadily. Apart from helping owners with problems there, I also supported them by e-mail, telephone and in personal consultations. As a group, we achieved a lot with very many birds.

Many questions are regularly and repeatedly asked. At the very top of the list are taming, basic training, and husbandry issues. Another big topic is occupational therapy for these highly intelligent creatures which are often terribly bored in captivity. Boredom is a major cause of behavioral disorders in captive parrots. Other important issues addressed are solving problem behaviors, especially biting and screaming, as well as learning wanted behaviors. These include "eating broccoli" and "being nice" to other birds, animals, and humans.

Clicker training can also greatly support the re-socialization and pairing up of birds which have been kept in solitary confinement for years. There are no limits on how clicker training may

be utilized for the well-being of the animals. By no means are we constrained to training only parrots. On our message board people participated who trained with chicken and even with a crow who astounded all of us with her ability to identify colors.

With the help of clicker training, you can prepare your birds for various husbandry procedures, such as giving them medicine out of a syringe or grooming their claws and beaks. The need for help is still unlimited. In order for this wonderful training method to become available to more owners and their birds, I decided to write this introductory book on clicker training. After all, not everyone has access to the internet and often people find it easier to train with a written text in their hands.

Clicker Training for Parrots and Other Birds



Photo: David Jayne

It is so much more pleasant for you and your bird to learn grooming techniques via clicker training than to have to use a towel and force.



Photo: David Jayne

Jack's upper beak was bitten off by his parents and will not grow back. His lower beak must be trimmed regularly, in order to not hinder Jack when eating or cause misalignment of his jaw. Having his beak trimmed is a painless procedure for Jack. Trained with clicker training, it can easily be done without toweling or other constraints while his mate, Scarlett, looks on.

Ann M. Castro



2. Introduction

Many books on dog training are available, but hardly any on how to train birds.

This is particularly surprising, as parrots are such popular pets. Sadly though, many of them are integrated poorly into their households and families. Often taming and “good” behavior are a problem. Necessary actions, such as grooming, cage cleaning, or trips to the veterinarian are high-stress situations for the bird and his owner. In addition, there exist a variety of problems, such as screaming, biting, and feather picking. These may reduce the living quality of the owners



Photo: David Jayne
Clicker training helps humans and animals to communicate better with each other.

to the point where they no longer want to keep their birds. Fortunately, such issues may easily be resolved with suitable training. All you need is the right method, some patience, and consistency.

Is Training Equal to Training?

There are dozens of books on dog training. Why then do we need an extra book on bird training? Dogs are hunters, parrots are prey. Thus, parrots and dogs exhibit different behaviors and reactions. In dogs you can utilize their hunting impulses for training. The same

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Photo: David Jayne
Clicker training is fun for teacher and student alike.

methods would simply not work with parrots. As an example, think of the simple “come” command in which the animal is supposed to return to you whenever you call it. In teaching a dog, you would run away from it and it would follow. When it reaches you, you would lavishly praise and reward it, reinforcing its following behavior. When you run away from a parrot, however, the bird might look at you and be mildly surprised at the antics of its crazy owner. But it will hardly start chasing you, as it does not have a hunting instinct. This is just one example of why you need another method



Photo: David Jayne
Taking medication from a syringe is another behavior that may be clicker trained.

for training a parrot as opposed to a dog. There are many others, as apart from their behavior their body languages are also completely different. Furthermore, dogs cannot fly. The additional dimension of height results in increased challenges for parrot owners.

Why Clicker Training?

The basic principle of clicker training is to catch the animal doing something you like and to reinforce that behavior. Clicker training's advantages are many:

- ✦ it is humane

Clicker Training for Parrots and Other Birds



- 👉 it shows results quickly
- 👉 it is easy
- 👉 you do not have to know what caused a behavioral problem to solve it
- 👉 the animals love it!
- 👉 it works.

The beautiful thing is that in clicker training, the animal is always treated kindly and respectfully. It will never make negative experiences with its trainer – that’s us. Thus, the relationship and trust between the animal and us improves continuously with training.

In addition, clicker training will give the animal a certain feeling of control over its environment. It learns that it can communicate with us and that it can actively influence what happens. If it would like a treat, the bird knows it can do something to get its caretaker to give it a treat. This will increase its self-confidence which in turn has a positive effect on its behavior. Many behavioral problems result from fear – self confidence counteracts fearfulness. But apart from the theory, the best part of clicker training is quite simply that it works and that it is a lot of fun for both, the birds and their owners, alike.

3. Before We Begin

Please note that clicker training cannot compensate for poor keeping conditions or even illnesses.

If a parrot suddenly changes its behavior, this should always be viewed as a warning signal by the owner. Please, do your animal and yourself a favor and consult an experienced avian veterinarian without delay. In the wild, if a parrot is obviously ill or injured, it is recognized by animals of prey as an easy target. In addition, because it will attract predators which may endanger the flock, ill or injured animals may be excluded from the flock. This is a

NOTE

A sad story is that of an Amazon parrot which had for years been a sweet cuddly bird when it suddenly started to bite. An experienced behavioral consultant who visited the family, immediately saw that the bird's wing was broken and that the animal was in pain. After the fracture had healed, the Amazon was as sweet as ever.

death sentence for the bird in question. Therefore, parrots, being prey animals, hide their illnesses and injuries for as long as possible. Once your parrot has become ill enough that clearly noticeable symptoms appear, it may be too late to help him. Therefore, it is strongly advisable to start off a new parrot to your home with a thorough health exam. This ascertains that you obtained a healthy bird. It also gives you a baseline, a point of reference, should your bird become ill at a later point. In addition, an acquisition check-up plus quarantine will ensure that you do not endanger any birds already living in your household by inadvertently exposing them to an ill bird. A yearly general well bird check-up by an experienced avian veterinarian specialized on parrots is a must. It is of utmost importance that your veterinarian is truly experienced in parrots. Many



Photo: Maïke Schumann

Healthy or ill? Regular well-bird check-ups are a must.

symptoms for parrot diseases are rather unspecific. Thus for any given symptom, several illnesses could apply. An accurate diagnosis may be difficult to make, especially, if the veterinarian has little experience with parrots. Also, some of the symptoms may be so subtle that they may only be recognized by an experienced avian veterinarian. Last, but not least, experience is required to safely catch, restrain, and examine an unwilling parrot.

Keeping

Factors contributing to your parrots' health and well being can be best deduced from observing

parrots and their habitats, mostly humid-tropical areas, in the wild.

Happy Only With Mates

Parrots are flock animals. Most species also undergo pair-bonding and spend their entire lives with a mate. A human being is not able to replace a parrot's mate. It is highly unlikely that you will be able to provide twenty-four hours per day, seven days per week non-stop company for your parrot for the next thirty to sixty years.

As parrots are prey animals, their mates and flocks, apart from their social importance, also provide safety. A parrot in the wild is “lunch” – literally – for predators. Thus, he finds himself in a life-threatening situation when he is alone. These instincts are still very much present in birds bred and raised in captivity. Therefore, to a parrot living in captivity, being left alone while you go to work, shopping, or to the movies, is highly stressful.

This kind of stress will often lead to behavioral problems. Contact calls to the flock that develop into continuous screaming, for example, are no rarity. Other birds are so stressed that they pluck their feathers or even self-mutilate. I would strongly advise for the love of

your bird (and your eardrums), to give him a same species, opposite gender mate. Unfortunately, traditional belief holds that only a single parrot will be a tame parrot. Also, many people believe that only a single parrot will learn to speak which may be important to some owners. All of this is simply not true. If you lavish as much time and attention on each individual of a pair or flock of parrots, as you would on a single bird, each of them will be at least as tame as any single bird.

While I am writing these lines, eighteen parrots live with me in a flock. Most of them come from several previous homes, some of them abusive. Not all of them were tame when they came to live with me. Many of them were given up, because of behavioral problems, usually screaming and biting. These birds have in all cases improved tremendously after integration into the flock and have turned into well-adjusted happy parrots.

And regarding tameness – oh, I wish you could visit me! Most of my parrots are so tame that they are almost a nuisance. Here too, the adage holds that “competition is good for business”, as they all vie for my attention. Newcomers learn quickly by observing the more senior inhabitants, how nice it



Photo: David Jayne
Hector and Lily: Snuggling is no reason to give up the clicker.



Photo: Frank Kroner/Nicola Penski
Even when parrots have mates and live in a flock – they love human attention. Here you can see Nicola's gang eagerly clicker training with her. By the way, none of her birds are handraised – they were all lovingly reared by their parents. This debunks another myth – that only handraised parrots make good pets.

is to be cuddled, coddled, and spoiled with treats. They also learn from each other how to speak and constantly surprise me with new phrases that spread in no time throughout the flock. My beloved Blue and Gold Macaw Nikita passed away in late November 2003. But, she lives on in the phrases of the flock. Her favorite saying is imitated so exactly in voice by birds which joined the flock after her death that it regularly drives tears to my eyes. The animals never met, but learned the phrase from Nikita's surviving mate, Jack, who still says it from time to time.

End of preview for this book

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