

Training Basic Skills

Many parrots instinctively strive for a position of dominance within their flock (your household). Many of the behavioral problems that can arise from such a situation, may be prevented when the owner is clearly established as the flock leader instead. Training serves to build trust between you and your parrot while at the same clarifying the parrot's position within the household.

Skills commonly taught to companion parrots include:

1. Fundamental verbal commands for pet birds are “UP” and “DOWN”.

The two most important things you can teach your bird are to step onto your hand using an “UP” command spoken in a firm, pleasant manner, and to step off with the “DOWN” command. Use these commands consistently. Other important verbal commands are “OKAY” and “NO”.

2. Towel handling

Regular, gentle towel handling or cuddling will make visits to your avian veterinarian much easier for your pet. Lay a towel out flat and place the bird in the center. Gradually pick up the corners. Some birds, particularly young birds, may enjoy playing peek-a-boo. Once your bird is used to this, playfully wrap her up in the towel. Pick her up and cuddle her.

3. Examine wings and toes

The ability to easily touch your pet's toes and wings will make the grooming process much easier. Begin by gently touching toes while your bird is on a perch or wrapped in the towel. Gently lift each wing with your fingers. When your bird is comfortable with having both wings spread, touch each flight feather. Find a command word to say while touching toes and wings that works for you and your bird.

4. Stick training allows you to maintain hand control of your parrot even when it is feeling a bit too “spirited” to place your hand in its cage. Stick training may be particularly helpful in sexually mature parrots during the breeding season. While playing with your parrot, lay an appropriately-sized branch or dowel rod down on a flat surface like the floor or bed. As your parrot steps on it, gradually lift the stick up. Once your bird is used to this, ask her to step onto the stick using the “UP” command.

5. Regularly **spoon or syringe feeding** a treat makes it much easier to medicate your parrot. Feed a soft, flavorful item like sweet potato baby food. Make sure the food is warm (100 to 105°F), but not hot. Stir well if a microwave is used to prevent hot spots. Do not allow the your bird to “pump” as a baby bird would, just dribble the soft food into the beak.

Training Sessions

- Select a neutral room, away from the cage, and a neutral perch.
- Practice skills with your bird regularly.
- Birds have short attention spans, so a good starting point is to have 15 minute sessions, three times a week, at the same time daily.
- Make sure there are no distractions such as television or conversation with others.
- Be prepared. Get everything together for a training session before removing your bird from its cage.
- Be patient, be persistent, and keep things simple focusing on one behavior each session.
- Use positive reinforcement such as praise, food treats, affection, or a favorite toy. Never yell or hit.

If you are interested in training your pet bird, the information provided here is only a starting point. Excellent sources on training and behavior include, but are not limited to: Sally Blanchard's [Companion Parrot Handbook](#), [Guide to a Well-Behaved Parrot](#) by Mattie Sue Athan, [My Parrot, My Friend](#) by Bonnie Munro Doane and Thomas Qualkinbush, and [Birds for Dummies](#) by Gina Spadafori and Dr. Brian Speer.

References

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Lightfoot T, Nacewicz CL. Psittacine behavior. In: Bays TB, Lightfoot T, Mayer J (eds). *Exotic Pet Behavior*. Saunders; St. Louis, Missouri, 2006. Pp. 51-101.

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