

Becoming A Parrot Behavior Consultant

The opportunity to help people better relate to their bird's problem behaviors makes the long journey to becoming a parrot behavior consultant all worthwhile.

By Liz Wilson, CVT, CPBC

Q: I have loved birds all my life and want to help them in any way that I can. From experience working in pet stores, I have found that I am a natural at working with parrots, so I have decided that I want to be a parrot behavior consultant. How did you become one, and is there a school that will teach me how to be one?

Courtesy Michele Wilson, Kansas

Parrot behavior consultants can help bird owners to better understand their birds.

A: The field of companion parrot behavior consulting has existed for about 20 years, pioneered by Chris Davis, but there are not many of us around.

Our purpose is simple, but not easy. Parrot behavior consultants try to teach people how to deal with the problem behaviors that they encounter in their parrots, educating these owners about the normal behaviors and motivations of these intelligent and complex creatures in their care. We do this one-on-one through house calls and phone consultations, or with large groups through lectures, seminars and publications.

There is no actual program, that I know of, that gives you all the training you need to become a parrot behavior consultant. However, a variety of approaches might help you find the knowledge you seek.

Knowledge is Power

I would suggest that you read every book and magazine you can find that contains information on parrot behavior. Also, attend parrot conferences and lectures whenever possible. You will see advertisements for them in the back of this magazine, and will be able to tell via name recognition when a parrot behavior consultant is lecturing somewhere near you. Also, there are college-based community and online courses that teach some fundamentals such as learning theory, a general understanding of animal behavior and interviewing techniques.

In my opinion, the best news regarding becoming a parrot behavior consultant is the International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants (IAABC). The IAABC was founded in 2003 by a Pittsburgh family therapist and dog behavior expert Lynn Hoover, and it offers continuing education, resources, ethics and practical guidelines and certification to experienced practitioners and trainees in the cat, dog, parrot and horse behavior fields.

As Ms. Hoover said: "The IAABC is dedicated to helping interested applicants develop the knowledge, skill and ethics base they need to help families with parrots. We trust that when parrot owners are able to find qualified help in their communities, they will seek help rather than inappropriately punish or abandon their parrots with issues."

The parrot division of the IAABC is quite new, but we are working on setting up training programs, mentoring and tutorials for those who are interested in learning how to become professional companion parrot behavior consultants. We have already provided certification for parrot behavior consultants who are experienced enough to be grandfathered in. Anyone who is truly interested in starting the process of becoming trained (and hopefully certified) as a parrot behavior consultant should contact the IAABC about what you might need to do to become accepted as an associate member.

An important piece of advice regarding becoming a parrot behavior consultant is: Don't quit your day job. Few people are working full time as professional parrot behavior consultants, because the field is not yet lucrative enough for most of us to "make a living" at it. That said, this does not mean you cannot learn to help people learn to live happily with their pet parrots – just don't bet your mortgage on generating enough income to be able to support yourself on it.

But Can You Train People?

Incidentally, your comment about being "a natural at working with parrots" gives me pause. The reality is that parrot behavior consultants work with people more than they work with parrots, so this is not likely to help you work with parrot owners.

As I understand the phenomenon, a "natural" is someone who does something innately. In other words, a person who is a natural cannot break down the process into steps that can be taught to someone else. I am not a natural at working with

parrots. As a parrot behavior consultant, I train people, not parrots. My work involves recognizing and changing the human patterns that have contributed to the development of bird problem behaviors, and being a natural with parrots might not assist as much as you might think in that process.

Your natural ability might be more helpful if you worked directly with parrots, like someone who teaches parrots to do tricks in shows or who rehabilitates parrots in a rescue or re-homing organization.

Last bit of advice for future parrot behavior consultants: In my opinion, no one has a corner on knowledge when it comes to working with parrots, so please do not buy into just one training approach, as that will greatly limit your success in this field. No single method will be totally effective with every bird and every owner.

The more you learn about the various approaches to behavior and training, the better will be your depth perception and therefore your understanding. The better your depth perception and understanding, the more flexible you will become in your thinking, and the more effective you will be in helping birds and their loving but befuddled humans.