

Smart And Sassy Quaker Parrots

Quaker parrot owners boast of their birds' vast intelligence.

By Angela Pham

Fonzie, a 12-year-old quaker parrot, reacts to television shows much like a person might.

She watched a broadcast of Good Morning America with the cast from Dancing with the Stars and cheered them on, saying "Turn around!" and "Good dance!" While a Richard Simmons exercise video played, Fonzie the parrot picked up her wings and danced along, asking her owner, Ellen Krueger, if she needed a drink of water after the routine ended.

Photos Courtesy of Paula Cook

Quaker's display an in-context vocabulary that surprises people. Their misconceived reputation leads to surprised reactions to their sharp wit.

It's these displays of extensive and appropriate, in-context vocabulary that convince many bird owners that their quaker parrots are genuinely intelligent and capable of knowing what to say at exactly the right time. But their intelligence extends beyond just words. These parrots are notorious for being all-around clever birds, from weaving complex structures to unlocking complicated doors.

Krueger, editor of The Quaker Parakeet Society's newsletter, The Sentinel, and a freelance author of books about her quaker parrot, said Fonzie's signs of intelligence aren't rare among quaker parrots. She described another quaker-owning friend whose cockatiel passed away, leaving its mate alone in the cage.

"[Her Quaker parrot] climbed down from his cage, walked over to the other bird's cage and gave this bird a tissue," Krueger said. "They understand."

The treasurer of The Quaker Parakeet Society, Paula Cook, said her quaker parrot, Precious, taught its vocabulary to her 4-month-old blue quaker, Periwinkle. Periwinkle developed phrases that Cook had never spoken before, she said, making her a true believer in quaker birds' intelligence.

"The two of them just exchanged voicemails, I guess, while I was gone," Cook said.

This clever bird species is known as much for its talking as it is for its actions. Tom Nemerovsky, an owner and breeder of quaker parrots since 1980, said that the intelligence of the quakers must be in their nature, as he's encountered numerous signs of cognitive abilities. The proof is in the locks with chew-proof nylon webbing he has to attach to each and every cage door that houses a quaker, he said.

"They'll watch you for the first three days you put them in and out," he said. "They're watching you. They'll do the same thing."

But don't expect the quaker parrots to be predictable. Rhonda Heflin, fundraising committee member at The Quaker Parakeet Society, said her quaker parrot Chance Man definitely has a mind of his own.

"He's not a circus bird," Heflin said. "You don't make them talk. They shut their beak and stare at you when you try to say, 'They can do this!'"

Her bird, Chance Man, accompanies her nearly everywhere, chatting all the way. While the quaker parrot may not be the most beautiful-looking bird out there, Heflin said, it is a companion bird that she can't imagine living without.

Chance Man understands that at 4 p.m., it's dinner time, Heflin said. Around 7 p.m., he'll tell her, "I'm tired." At almost 8 years old, his vocabulary is at about 75 words, and he's even learned how to help Heflin make her bed, pulling the sheet up himself when he sees that the bed isn't made.

"They scare you," she said. "We've had him since he was 10 weeks old, and his brain has gone just so far. Chance Man's doing something different every few days."

Quaker parrot enthusiasts admit that those who aren't familiar with the bird species might underestimate their complex intelligence. Their small stature, muted colors and misconceived reputation as destructive "crop pests" lead to many surprised reactions at their vocabulary and wit.

Although some state governments perceive the quaker parrot to be a threat to local crops, Cook said the birds are not a hazard at all. Through The Quaker Parakeet Society, she hopes to enlighten the general public of the truth about the parrot species.

Krueger casts the bird in a similar optimistic light.

"They're not a destructive or invasive species," she said. "They're really fun birds. If you approach them the right way, they'll be friends with almost anybody."