

## The Who, Why And How of Parrot Talking

### A look at pet bird talking abilities.

By Rebecca Sweat

Jessica Meyers of Texas has a blue-fronted Amazon parrot that likes to sit in his cage and carry on a phone conversation by himself. "He'll start out with 'Hello' and 'I'm doing fine,' say some 'Uh-huhs' and an 'Oh, really?'" and end with 'Bye-bye. Talk to you later.' He goes through this whole dialogue a couple of times every day – usually after he hears the phone ring," Meyers related.

Courtesy Heather Strella, California

African grey parrots are known as one of the best talking parrot species.

Benny, an umbrella cockatoo owned by Ron Gorski of Michigan, frequently tells Gorski's two young sons to "Be quiet!" and "Stop that!" at the appropriate times – when the boys are arguing or rough-housing and being too noisy.

Avian veterinarian Gregory Burkett, DVM, of North Carolina, has an African grey parrot named Candy with a vocabulary of 700 words. She speaks in sentences, responds to questions, greets people with their name and makes requests for food – especially when she sees other people eating.

Some parrots are more into singing than talking. Virginia aviculturist Kashmir Csaky lives with several macaws that hum or sing such tunes as "Let's Go To The Hop," "Mellow Yellow," "Happy Birthday" and "Jingle Bells." They also like to sing the "Tequila" song. "Even if just one of the macaws is singing by itself, the other birds will all chime in and yell 'Tequila!' at the right time," Csaky said.

There's no doubt about it – parrots can certainly entertain, delight and even impress us with their vocal abilities. Sometimes it's amazing just how many words they pick up or how clearly they speak. Other times we're surprised by how they just happen to say the right thing at the right moment or respond correctly when we ask them questions.

Most bird behaviorists tell us that just about any parrot species has the potential for mimicking human speech. Some bird species are, however, more talented at mimicry than others. The top talkers overall – in terms of clarity and size of their vocabulary – are generally considered to be the African grey parrot and the yellow-naped, double yellow-headed and blue-fronted Amazon parrots.

Other parrots known for their talking abilities include macaws (especially the blue-and-gold macaw and hyacinth macaw), cockatoos (particularly the bare-eyed cockatoo and slender-billed cockatoo) and conures (most notably the blue-crowned conure). Indian ring-necked parakeets, Eclectus and budgerigars (parakeets) are also known to be good talkers. There are even a number of nonpsittacine birds that have this ability. The best known is the mynah bird. Others include the common grackle, crow, raven, blue jay and even the mockingbird.

### Why Mimic Human Speech?

Companion birds learn to "speak human" for three main reasons: to try to fit in with their human "flock," to communicate various types of messages and to seek attention from the people around them.

In the wild, parrots live in flocks, which provides them with a sense of security. They spend much of their waking hours calling out and talking to each other in "bird language" to stay in contact with each other, to notify each other of food sources, to warn each other of predators, to locate lost flock members and to make sure everyone is accounted for at the end of the day. Hearing the vocalizations of fellow flock members is very reassuring to wild parrots.

In captivity, a pet bird sees its owner and other humans in the household as its flock. Because everyone else in the household is "speaking human," the pet bird will often imitate the language being spoken by the flock. "The pet bird wants to be part of the flock and will talk like the other flock members to be accepted as part of the group," Dr. Burkett said.

Just like a wild parrot, your pet bird may vocalize to communicate particular messages to you. It may repeat certain phrases when it is hungry, to greet you when you get up in the morning or come home from work, to try to locate you when you are out of its sight or to warn you of predators when it sees something frightening.

More often than not, though, "pet parrots talk because they want attention," according to biologist and parrot

communication researcher Irene Pepperberg, Ph.D., author of *The Alex Studies* (Harvard University Press, 1999). "It doesn't take long for your bird to learn that when it says 'Hi,' you're right at its cage door and saying 'Hi' back."

Aviculturist Steve Hartman of Ohio has a yellow-naped Amazon parrot that will immediately start talking whenever Hartman ignores it. "If I'm standing in front of its cage talking to someone else, it will start repeating actual parts of the conversation, just like a tape recorder," Hartman related. "The bird sees me paying attention to someone who's talking and figures that if it wants attention, it's going to have to use words too."