

Teach Your Bird to Talk

Exotic birds captivate us because they often communicate with us in our own language

By Susan Chamberlain

Birds, like this quaker parrot, can communicate using our own language. Courtesy Vicki Hartsfield

Exotic birds captivate us because they often communicate with us in our own language. African greys have an uncanny ability to use appropriate words in conjunction with events or objects, as illustrated in Dr. Irene Pepperburg's research with her grey parrot, Alex. Some birds call family members and pets by name, and even bark and meow. What about your bird's talking potential?

Your bird's little quirks and loving personality are what make it unique. Love your bird for these qualities and regard speech as an "extra." However, there are things you can do to encourage your bird to speak.

Barbara, who has worked with birds for decades, suggests making an audiotape of yourself talking and singing to your bird; then tape the bird talking and singing as he begins to imitate you. "Have fun! The birds will love hearing you both bantering back and forth. Make new tapes as you progress."

In most cases it's inadvisable to buy an unweaned bird (too problematic for the inexperienced), but you can begin teaching your bird to talk at any age. When you walk into the room and your bird looks at you, say the words you want it to repeat. Change the phrase every few weeks. Some birds, even African greys, may take a year to speak unless they're exceptionally talented or there's another good talker in residence.

Whisper to your bird. Sing. Change the pitch of your voice. Notice when its eyes dilate and pin, and when it tries to emulate you.

Don't pair your birds during their speech-training years. Most paired birds will converse in their own language instead of yours, yet there is no better teacher than another bird. When one bird is an accomplished talker, odds are good that the new pet will learn from it. Results seem best when birds do not share the same cage and vocalize to get each other's attention. If your pet is an only bird, consider making an audiotape of a friend's talkative bird and play it for yours.

Use specially recorded speech training tapes and CD's, available at pet shops to help your bird to learn to talk, but continue your own lessons too. Leave the television or radio on when you are out of the house. Your bird might surprise you by picking up an advertising jingle or cartoon sound effects!

When your bird learns a new word or phrase, reinforce it by repeating it frequently. Reward your bird with a special treat, toy or special attention. You'll know you've succeeded when you begin mimicking the bird!