

Budgie Talk

UCI researcher, Marin L. Moravec, explains why budgies say the things they do

By Rose Gordon

POSTED: March 7, 2007, 5 a.m. EST

Marin L. Moravec, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Irvine

Marin L. Moravec, a Ph.D. candidate at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), went from studying worms at the University of Oregon to the fun — but challenging — world of birds in Professor Nancy Burley's Dept. of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology Laboratory.

Intrigued by a colleague's finding that female budgies are more interested in mating with males that sound similar to them than males that sound different, Moravec decided to delve further into the private babblings of budgerigars and learn more about their courtship behavior. Six years later, she's still talking bird. BIRD TALK recently visited her at the UCI aviary.

Q: In the department of biology there are a million things to study. Why did you choose birds?

A: Birds are incredibly fun to watch, particularly the budgies with which I work. I think that people in general are drawn to birds for one reason — because they communicate mostly visually and vocally just like we do. Since we communicate the same way, we're already hard-wired to accept and appreciate those patterns. They're very smart, too, which can be a little bit annoying when you're trying to study them because they sometimes get out of their cages or just decide they don't want to behave for you on a particular day, which is fun but also a challenge.

Q: Why would one budgie have a call similar to another budgie's call?

A: That's actually what I'm still exploring. I did find in my study, when I was checking neighbors versus strangers, that the ones that grew up being able to hear the other ones, did sound more similar to each other than they did the strangers, which they grew up never hearing.

Q: Why do budgies mimic each other?

A: That's a good question. It could be any number of things. One reason might be because their social environment changes fairly often. They fly around in these huge flocks, but then when it comes time to breed, they split up into smaller flocks. So it may be one way to find your breeding flock. It may have something to do with the fact that they interact with so many birds in a large flock and it's just a way to keep track of who you already know. We're not really sure.