

## Animal Trainer On “Pirates of the Caribbean”

**Mark Harden finds treasure with Chip and Salsa, a pair of blue & golds.**

*By Rose Gordon*

Although he’s trained bears, sea lions and tigers, two of animal trainer Mark Harden’s favorite — and most intelligent — students are Chip and Salsa, a pair of blue-and-gold macaws that star in Disney’s “Pirates of the Caribbean” 1, 2 and 3.

The biggest challenge with these macaws was teaching them not to act, Harden said. When you let a macaw hang out on a shoulder for most of his scenes, he starts to improvise. Sometimes, this was appreciated.

After a long day of shooting, when the last scene starts to drag on, the birds often yell, “Cut,” Harden related. At other times, especially when the sun begins to set, it’s hard to get them to turn it off. “They’ll just go off,” Harden said. “You’re on a set and they’re noisy, noisy birds.” Well, they are macaws.

Chip and Salsa play the parrot that talks for the pirate Cotton (David Bailie), whose tongue was cut out in a disagreement. Cotton joins Captain Jack Sparrow’s (Johnny Depp) motley crew in the first movie, “Pirates of the Caribbean: The Curse of the Black Pearl (2003),” to chase after the traitorous Captain Barbossa (Geoffrey Rush).

The blue-and-golds offer comedic relief with typical macaw flair for timing, such as pooping on a guard at the end of the first movie.

Only one bird appears at a time, but both birds play the same character. “We use animal doubles,” Harden said. “It creates a complete character.”

Some scenes require the bird to sit still on a shoulder. That’s when Harden calls in 8-year-old Chip. He’s the “sitter,” the laid-back parrot. When the scene calls for more animation or flying, fully-flighted, 10-year-old Salsa takes to the set. “Salsa is my performance bird,” Harden said. He does most of the tricks, too.

With a combination of food, praise, clickers and repetition, Harden taught the birds a variety of tricks from “stay” to moving their mouths on cue to simulate talking, bobbing their heads and target flying. The birds work for food all day. Harden starts by offering them their core diet, a mix of pellets. Then they move on to “better stuff,” such as seed, fruit and nuts.

“You don’t have to pay them with every trick,” Harden said. They catch on quickly and will perform a number of tricks in a row for one treat. The clicker works when words are not quick enough for the birds.

Besides the tricks, Harden — and any other Hollywood animal trainer — has to prepare the birds for a movie set complete with lights, floating debris, lots of noise and, in this case, boats. To do this, Harden studies the special effects ahead of time. “It’s my job to acclimate them,” he said. He’s found, however, that most birds adjust quicker than expected. “I stopped working so hard to protect them ... They’ve gotten used to the noise.”

It takes about three months to prep birds for this type of movie, Harden said: one month to socialize them and two months to learn the tricks, including flight training.

On their off-time, the birds are allowed to interact with the rest of the cast, but on the set, they are strictly professional. “Like any other performer on the set, they have to concentrate,” Harden said. “It’s not a party; it’s a job.”

Similarly, Harden keeps his relationship with the birds, and all his charges, on the trainer-student model. “You don’t want to be [seen as] a spouse or parent, because then they get aggressive toward others.” Harden has a zero-tolerance policy for baby talk and eye pinning.

Nonetheless, the birds receive “a lot of attention.” Days on the set might last 10 hours or more. Of course, there is downtime when the birds return to their cages or outdoor perches. “A good movie animal will learn to relax on set,” Harden said. They’re also treated to outdoor sun and spray baths between takes.

Harden was the lead animal trainer on the second film, “Pirates of the Caribbean: Dead Man’s Chest,” and the animal coordinator on the first and third. Besides the birds, Harden worked with white-throated capuchin monkeys that feature

prominently in the first film and will appear in the second and third films.

In fact, training monkeys and birds is a lot alike, Harden said. "They're smart, they're social, they're continuous feeders, they're aggressive, they're loveable, they operate in a 3-D world [trees]..." Unfortunately, for the primates, the birds might be quicker studies. "The poor monkeys mess up more than the birds," Harden said.

Harden works for Boone's Animals for Hollywood, Inc., and many of his credits include training cats and dogs, such as those in "Must Love Dogs" and "Catwoman." Still, he holds birds in high regard, especially a certain infamous blue-crowned conure, Guido, who played the lead bird in "Paulie." That bird still works with Harden's employer and performs nearly 150 tricks.

Although he doesn't have birds, Harden can see why birds like Chip and Salsa are so popular. "I share laughs with them all the time," Harden said.

They've also shared some tight quarters. The movie calls for shooting at exotic locales to capture that Caribbean feel, so the birds traveled to St. Vincent, Dominica and the Bahamas. "We spent a lot of time commuting," Harden said. Luckily for the birds (not so lucky for Harden), they fly via a chartered cargo plane, which means the birds are within Harden's reach at all times.

The crew was filming on Grand Bahama Island when Hurricane Wilma blew through last October. As a precaution, Disney evacuated everyone, Harden said. Because of the hassle to transport CITES Appendix II birds, however, Harden chose to stay on the island with the macaws. Although the wind was whipping around outside, the birds didn't seem to notice at all, he said.

Filming of the third film, "Pirates of the Caribbean: World's End," plans to continue late this summer. In all three movies, the birds have "plot points." Harden doesn't want to give it away, but said, "They help move the action along. They're not just extras." Look for the latest "Pirates of the Caribbean" installment in theaters July 7, 2006.