

Playtime for Parrots

by Elaine Radford
Metairie, Louisiana

At the end of the day it's easy to plant your favorite parrot on your shoulder and switch on the tube. But odds are that the networks' latest aren't any more stimulating to Polly's physique and intellect than they are to yours. To deepen your bond with your parrot while exercising its body and mind, what you really need to do is indulge in some good old-fashioned play.

Why Play Is Important

The physical benefits of play are pretty obvious. A fit, exercised body can meet stresses such as molting, aging, and illness far more readily than an out-of-shape system can. Furthermore, an active bird can eat more without gaining weight, giving it a better chance of fulfilling its daily nutrient requirements. It has become a truism that avian performers, the athletes of the bird world, live longer and stay healthier than non-performers given the same care.

Although they're less tangible, the

psychological rewards are equally important. Play wards off boredom, a significant factor in feather plucking and depression, by giving the parrot a way to use the considerable intelligence it developed to cope with life in the wild. Games and tricks also give the bird a positive way to win your approval and attention. (You'll agree, I think, that a somersault is a more pleasant way to get your notice than a piercing shriek.) Finally, sharing quality, as opposed to couch potato, time with your parrot can only deepen your relationship as your pet learns that you mean fun.

There's even a mental benefit: you may actually make your parrot "smarter" through play! Perhaps some of you have heard of psychologist Irene Pepperberg's experiment with a previously untrained African grey named Alex. Instead of rewarding him with food for speaking, a technique that works only as long as the bird is hungry, Pepperberg and her students incorporated his language lessons into the four hours of daily play. Within a year, Alex could name fifty items common in his play environment and even use simple sentences to express his desires.

How to Play with a Parrot

Your toys can range from the complex to the nonexistent. Remember playing "ladder" when you were training your bird — letting it step from one hand to the other as you raised them higher and higher? Your parrot would probably enjoy another round, no props required. Another simple one is "tug of war" with a short length of chain or a piece of sturdy cardboard. (Cheat a little, and let the parrot win.) Handheld or mounted swings are always popular with hookbills. And although it may seem silly at first, a portable parrot playpen can greatly increase the amount of time your pet spends exercising rather than "supervising" from your shoulder.

Tricks are often the best way to engage your parrot in active play, but you shouldn't take them too seriously or expect Polly to put on a show for your friends. Parrots are individuals, and quite a few are natural hams, but your bird is probably in the majority that prefers to perform only around its few favorite people. Bear in mind that your purpose in teaching your bird

tricks is to give it new ways to have fun and get its exercise. Anything else is a bonus.

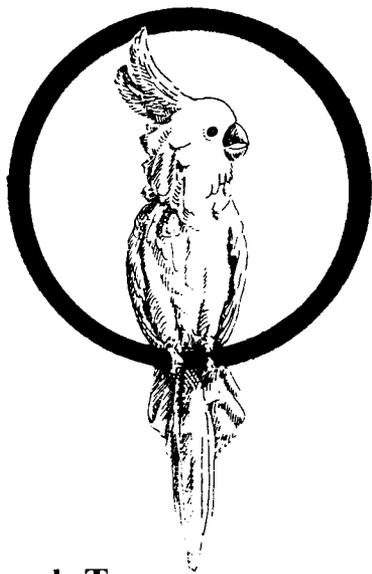
Professional trainers get reliable, "knee jerk" responses to trick commands because they use a technique called "operant conditioning." Conditioned animals react mechanically to a given stimulus because they have learned that the desired reaction earns them a reward, usually food. An example is the circus lion who jumps through the hoop on a hand signal and then is rewarded with a treat. Because the animal learns to respond automatically, it doesn't matter if the animal's not really tame or if it's feeling grouchy or doesn't much like crowds: the conditioning still works. However, although it produces superb performers that do their thing regardless of onlookers, operant conditioning is really more work than play. After all, the spontaneity of true play is removed — an advantage in a wild lion that would probably prefer munching on trainers to jumping through hoops, but not necessarily ideal when you want to entertain both you and your friendly, tame parrot. For playtime, I suggest you offer the chance to perform tricks on a low-key basis, rewarding your parrot with affection and attention for a good show.

Take advantage of the parrot's nature when choosing a trick. Teaching a parrot to put a coin in a piggy bank, for instance, is relatively easy because parrots like to pick up shiny things. Once it's got the coin in its beak, praise it highly and then tap another shiny coin near the slot in the bank. When the parrot drops the coin in the slot, praise it, perhaps scratching its head if it enjoys that.

Similarly, you can tempt a larger parrot to complete one of the simple toddler's puzzles because the bird is attracted by the bright, bold colors and learns to enjoy placing them in the correct spaces. In fact, a trip to the toy store can yield as many playtime ideas as a trip to the pet store. Of course you should make sure that there are no fragile parts or hazardous coatings on a toy, but most toys safe for children under three will be fine for Polly.

Keep it simple and relaxed, and you'll both look forward to playtime. Have fun! ●

For The Finest In Your
Bird's Food.

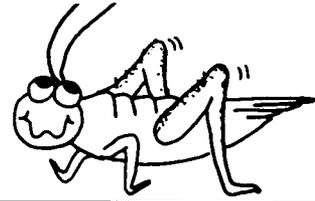


Look To:

Bay-Mor

Bay-Mor Plaza
Cressona, Pennsylvania. 17929
800-233-9740
(In PA. Call 800-342-5793)

LIVE CRICKETS!



For a number of years Fluker's Cricket Farm has been a major supplier of crickets to universities and zoos throughout the United States. Crickets — scientific name *Acheta domestica* (L.) — are a valuable nutritional supplement to the diet of many animals (crude dryweight analysis is 60%

protein, 35% lipid, and 5% carbohydrate). They make an excellent food for reptiles, amphibians, frogs, small animals, fish, spiders, large insects, etc. The advantages of using Fluker's crickets are many as you can see by the following excerpts from letters we have received:

"We have had good luck in using the crickets. Many of our animals (lizards and mammals) have shown healthy improvement since the crickets have been added to their diets."

MR. ROBERT J. FRUEH
CURATOR OF THE ST. LOUIS ZOOLOGICAL PARK
ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

"Here is an ideal feed item for many zoo animals. They are soft-bodied and thus have an advantage over meal worms whose hard outer shell is often indigestible and clogs up the intestines of animals."

MR. LAWRENCE CURTIS
FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE OKLAHOMA CITY ZOO
OKLAHOMA CITY, OKLAHOMA

"I wish to express my thanks to you for your excellent service. Your prompt deliveries have helped me very much!"

MR. J. ROTTER, BASEL, SWITZERLAND

"I consider your service a very valuable one for the scientific community, and hope it continues to grow and prosper. Its existence (*and your being able to ship year-round to Calgary*) is vital to my research program and I am sure to many others."

DR. LEON BROWDER
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR OF BIOLOGY,
THE UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY
CALGARY, ALBERTA, CANADA

We offer crickets in a variety of sizes and stages, from 1-day (1/8") to 6 weeks old (1").

Our crickets are \$12.00 per thousand, or a minimum order of 500 for \$9.00 plus postage. SHIPMENTS ARE MADE YEAR-ROUND WITH GUARANTEED LIVE DELIVERY. During extreme cold weather, shipments are made in a special insulated container to ensure live delivery.

Whatever your need for crickets, whether for animal feed or laboratory use, we offer fine, healthy specimens. Our com-

pany takes pride in good service, offering individual attention and efficient shipping. We would appreciate an opportunity to serve you with a standing order, or as you need them.

Fluker's Cricket Farm, Inc.

Richard Fluker - President

"Serving Satisfied Customers"
Wholesale Only - Guaranteed Live Delivery

P.O. Box 378 • Baton Rouge, LA 70821-0378
Farm: (504) 343-7035

OFFICE HOURS: 7:30 a.m. - 4:00 p.m. CST, MONDAY - FRIDAY