

Clicker Training: Client-shaped Positive Reinforcement

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Abstract: Clicker training is a form of operant conditioning (Skinner) and focuses on positive reinforcement for desired behavior. Used by professional animal trainers for years, very simple exercises can help your patients and enrich their lives.

Introduction

Clicker training has long been used by professional animal trainers for performances (marine mammal, circus, bird acts) and by canine obedience, agility, and conformation enthusiasts. Clicker training can help encourage desired behavior, reduce fear and anxiety, and provide emotional and physical outlets for our avian family members. The process is straightforward—identify or encourage a behavior, mark the behavior (clicker), positively reinforce (treat or other reward), and finally continue to shape.

Birds that can be trained

Just about any psittacine species can benefit from this exercise. Other avian species reportedly trained also include doves, chickens, crows, ducks, emus, kookaburras, hawks, vultures, owls, starlings, and penguins.

Benefits of clicker training

Avian trainers and behaviorists vary in their approach towards shaping bird behavior. Commonly, captive-reared psittacines are brilliant at training owners to suit their needs, rapidly learning to reinforce “owner” behavior. This pattern of interaction may lead to reinforcement of culturally undesirable behavior patterns in the companion avian. These behavior patterns may contribute to feather/skin damaging behavior, biting, screaming and unwanted egg-laying in the single female. Some people will promote teaching the bird who’s the boss; others will try to integrate the parrot into the family flock. While these ideas may have merit, others will argue that these interactions are counter to social interaction by the species in the wild.

Clicker training can provide an aid to teach your bird anything he or she is mentally and physically capable of learning. Clinically, clicker training may help reduce problem behaviors.

Classical Conditioning

Animals can learn to associate one seemingly unrelated thing with another, as a survival skill. This speaker’s parrots know that the smell of boiling pasta means there is something they want to eat (even though they get only a token amount). Another common example is the cat responding to the sound of a can opener.

Operant conditioning

Operant conditioning happens when an animal performs a behavior and then learns the consequences of its behavior. Consequences could be one of the following: positive reinforcement (goal of clicker training), punishment (often ineffective or worse in birds), or no consequence. Behavior that is not rewarded may fade away (unless the bird get his own jollies from it) by a process called extinction.

Benefits of positive reinforcement

Reinforced behaviors tend to increase in frequency, intensity, and duration. So this is jist of the whole plan–focus on the positive hopefully with a happier bird and owner. Undesirable behavior, such as biting and screaming can tend to fade away.

Before Starting

We will have to assume that the nutritional, health, environmental, and husbandry concerns are already reviewed and optimized. If you are seeing an avian patient for the first time, these issues should be addressed first. Compliance on general care is important. Clients unwilling to take care of basics probably won't be motivated to proceed to clicker training. Generally, wing clipping is a good idea before beginning a training program.

Young birds should be weaned before clicker training. Trainers advocate that you don't have to wait to start with a new adult bird coming into your home because the method is a great way to build trust. Older birds can easily be clicker-trained. The exercise can be easily performed by a motivated child. Client motivation may well be based on the fun of teaching tricks. The clinician may find this useful for helping serious behavior problems.

Plan on starting with only 3–5 minutes a day, working up to 20 minutes if all is going well. Experienced trainers advocate keeping a journal of your training sessions.

Treats

This about “paying” your companion after signaling (clicker) at the precise time the desired behavior is performed. Take the time to identify specially desired treats. Consider the overall nutritional program- these treats may be items that the parrot only gets while “working.” Establish what is always a hit and what can be consumed with little fanfare. We don't want to “take five” every time you pay your performer.

Some birds aren't motivated by treats. Other birds don't need the calories (for example an obese budgie). Non-food treats can include verbal rewards or physical rewards, such as head rubbing.

Basic Training Plan (Melinda Johnson)

1. Get the behavior
2. Mark the behavior with a cue
3. Reinforce the behavior

4. Refine the behavior
5. Add a cue

Getting the behavior

Capturing is simply marking and rewarding a natural behavior—the easiest of them all.

Modeling

Show your bird how something is done. Some parrots will enjoy learning by watching.

Luring

Luring involves the use of a “target.” For parrots, a chopstick is convenient. Consider the target as a cue or a pointer to help hint an already motivated subject.

Targeting

The goal is to get your bird to reach for but not bite the object that you are using (I prefer a chopstick). Click at the moment the bird reaches out to touch the target; reward.

Suggestions for Specific Behaviors

Stepping onto hand or wrist

Keep fingers together and thumb tucked. Approach bird low and slowly, raising your hand as you approach. Offer the opportunity to step forward and upward. If there is a hesitation, consider using the target if that behavior is already learned. When the bird promptly performs the behavior, click, treat and praise. Repeat 4 or 5 times.

Climbing a ladder

Place bird on one of the lowest rungs. Click when the top is reached.

Ringling a bell

Suspend the bell with 4 inches of narrow ribbon, below your hand. Hold the bell up to the bird as you did with the target. Click, treat, and praise (your rewards and cues can be all non-verbal) when the bird reaches out for the bell and rings it.

Other common tricks or behaviors that owners can train include “the retrieve, basketball, pulling a wagon, and agility.”

Teaching Manners

Coming and going from the cage on cue

Verbal cues, combined with targeting, can easily accomplish this. Click, treat, and praise exactly when the response to verbal cue happens.

Housebreaking

Learn to anticipate the location and frequency of your bird's dropping outputs. Designate a cue word, while holding your bird over a designated "pooping area." Click, treat, and praise.

Other behaviors

A variety of other "tricks" can be more easily trained and reinforced with clicker training. Problem behaviors, including screaming and biting may be helped. This assumes that the bird owner is equipped and motivated to apply a small investment in time.

Learning and Training References and Resources

- ◆ www.clickertraining.com Source of clicker training books seminars, and supplies for birds, dogs and other species.
- ◆ www.naturalencounters.com Bird Trainer Steve Martin's website
- ◆ www.hsnp.com Bob Bailey's chicken-training workshops
- ◆ Johnson, Melinda, Clicker Training for Birds, Sunshine Books, 2004, Waltham MA (recommended and available from www.clickertraining.com)
- ◆ Melinda co-hosts a listserv Bird Click (receive an email digest of member discussions) <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Bird-Click/>; downloadable guides.
- ◆ Morrow, Linda, Clicking with Birds, 2002 (recommended and available from her website: <http://community-2.webtv.net/Lincomacaws/ClickingwithBirds/>). Linda's website has downloadable resource guides in addition to her book for sale. Linda also maintains a listserv- <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/clickbirds/>
- ◆ Sources of clickers: dog shows, bird stores, pet stores, including Petco and PetsMart; www.clickertraining.com