

The Evolution of Control for our Striated Caracara

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Abstract

At Paradise Wildlife Park we acquired a young Striated caracara (*Phalacrocorax australis*) in September 2014. She was approximately 6 months old and had been bred at ZSL London Zoo.

We had a few ideas of what we wanted her to do during our show, standard caracara things like going into a dustbin, running through a tunnel and turning things over with her feet. Having worked with the species before I know how intelligent they are and that this can lead to them becoming ‘bored’ or ‘stuck in a rut’ if the same behaviours are asked each and every day in the same order. So right from day one we aimed to mix things up, offering lots of new behaviour ideas and never putting things in the same place two days running.

She also never gets the same food two days running, the amount constantly fluctuates and is frequently subsidised with live insects in enrichment items. In fact she probably receives the most enrichment of any of our birds simply because she is so keen to get into everything (even without food!)

Gradually we realised that she was so focused on exploring the new things in the flying arena that basically we could just stand in one place and reinforce her for completing the behaviours we wanted in ANY order. This gives her complete control over the way she does her ‘routine’ every day, and we can send her back to points or posts that she may have missed if necessary. She usually hits all points once before turning to us for instruction and then we can send her back to anything she didn’t perhaps do to the highest criteria. She is now just over 2 years old and starting to moult into her adult colours.

This has been an exercise in keepers relinquishing control pretty much completely – something we have tried to do with many of our birds, by offering them the choice to fly out of the aviary instead of going to get them, and flying them without anklets and jesses.

These birds have such an inquisitive and mischievous nature as I’m sure other caracara trainers have found, and she is usually one of the highlights of my day!

Write Up

Background

We acquired a 6 month old female striated caracara, bred at ZSL London Zoo in September 2014. I previously worked with a male bird at ZSL London Zoo and absolutely love the species. They are such inquisitive birds, and because of their natural behaviour they don’t seem to be scared of many things!

Here at Paradise we have already shifted away from traditional falconry and do not use anklets or jesses on our birds. We also give them the choice to participate in shows or training sessions by teaching them to fly straight out of their aviaries and fly back into them on cue during a show rather than having to 'go and get them'. Once out of the aviary all our birds are free to go wherever they please, however some birds have routines, and others have behaviour patterns that have been heavily reinforced in order for them to occur frequently.

This was the approach we tried with Tierra (our caracara) initially. We had a variety of obstacles for her – a tunnel to run through, a dustbin to raid, a tent to run into, and flower pots to turn over (in place of rocks/driftwood). The early stages of training involved a lot of prompting and cues from keepers in order to get her to do the behaviours we wanted. When we released her to the flying lawn we were constantly sending her to the next item we wanted her to interact with and reinforcing it.

Pretty quickly though we noticed she was offering us behaviours. Things that either had been reinforced or (I can only assume) she enjoyed doing – there were definitely some things like running through the tunnel that she did way more than we asked her to! So we basically stopped 'asking' her to do things, instead reinforcing the behaviours she offered to a high criteria. If she did the behaviour but did not reach the criteria we required we simply ignored it, reinforced the next behaviour and then cued her to go back to the previous behaviour. She almost without fail offered the behaviour to a higher standard when cued which gave us the opportunity to reinforce heavily, making this high criteria more likely to occur next time she offered the behaviour.

Although all of our birds are already given a lot of 'free choice' during the shows and their routines, the concept of just standing still and observing the caracara and reinforcing when appropriate was quite difficult to grasp for some members of the team. In a way this actually improved the behaviour of Tierra as the reinforcers were offered in an unpredictable fashion, different for each trainer.

Because of the way we allow Tierra such free choice in the show, we are able to use her as an example to other sections across the zoo about how to give their animals more control in a training session. It is still quite foreign to a lot of keepers (certainly here) the idea that if you let the animal CHOOSE it is likely to pick a behaviour with a strong reinforcement history but we can use Tierra to show how well this can work.

Future

We are always looking for new behaviours we can show with Tierra and quite a lot of these are born out of enrichment ideas. Although not all the behaviours are completely natural, they do show the naturally inquisitive nature of these wonderful birds which enables us to educate our audience about them. Because the birds are often persecuted in the Falkland Islands, it gives the audience a chance to see them in their mischievous state. On Christmas day we gave her some colourful boxes that had handles on them – she picked them up and ran around the enclosure with them! This gave us the idea of getting her to carry a lunch box or backpack

or similar and run across the flying lawn with it! All I know is whatever we do with her, it will be great fun watching her figure out what we want her to do.

I hope all of you get the chance to work with one of these wonderful birds at some point in your career!