

## **Training – It's Not Just for Shows!**

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Of course we all know how amazing it is to be able to teach our birds to interact with us and our guests, fly routines on cue and demonstrate their natural skills and abilities to enthralled audiences across the globe. The fact that we are able to work alongside our feathered co-workers and showcase them in this way, whilst educating our visitors at the same time, is I'm sure, a huge part of why we all love what we do. And we SHOULD love what we do – it's pretty awesome!

A lot of zoos have a team of keepers whose primary role is to care for and train these birds and mammals used in shows, and a whole separate team who do the husbandry of the 'non-show' birds, and the mammals housed on exhibit.

Most facilities have animal training programs in place for the majority of their mammals. Big cats, large hoofstock, and the primate departments will have an array of animals crate trained, injection trained, scale trained and able to cooperate with some veterinary procedures.

It's different for the bird teams. Across the world I have talked to bird breeders and keepers who actively believe that training is detrimental to the husbandry and, in particular the breeding of the birds they house. Yet in bird show teams we are able to crate our birds, get them to weigh daily, station in or out of their enclosure, cooperate in voluntary nail trims and foot care and even accept manual restraint or face masks for anaesthetic administration.

I believe it should be our mission to help out our fellow bird keepers and show them that even exhibit birds can learn behaviours to help them with husbandry, shifting, animal moves and veterinary care.

This concept is particularly new in the UK, where the idea of behavioural management departments (which are fairly common across the US) are few and far between. The zoos who do have training officers in place are doing a fantastic job of working alongside keepers to try to educate them on training and getting some great results.

Here at Paradise Wildlife Park our bird team look after the show birds AND the exhibit birds, which means we are able to use our training knowledge to try to improve the welfare of our aviary inhabitants too.

Over the last couple of years we have successfully trained a few behaviours in some of our exhibit birds. The one I am most proud of is the work we have done with a 4 year old parent reared burrowing owl *Athene cunicularis*. Being a parent reared owl, she was naturally quite fearful of keepers – whenever a keeper opened the aviary door to enter to feed or clean she would fly to the highest point and stay there, wide eyed until we left. With all of our show birds we work so hard to try and ensure they are comfortable with us and have control over the situation, and so this made me rather uncomfortable. I felt like every time I was entering the enclosure I was terrifying this bird and she was trying to get as far away from me as possible.

We came up with a plan to station train her, and scale train her, via protected contact. This was to try and make her more comfortable and let her understand that she could control the outcome of certain situations.

Initially all we changed was the way her food was presented. Instead of throwing in whole mice, we chopped them up into 'bite sized chunks'. Each time a keeper approached her aviary we simply threw in a small piece and kept walking. If she jumped to the ground and ate while we were still there, a second piece was added. By day 3, she was jumping to the ground as we approached the aviary and looking at us expectantly.

At this point we introduced a station – just a small square of astroturf which was a different colour and texture to the other substrate in her enclosure. Station training her was very easy, we simply shaped her movement towards the station, still through protected contact, and she quickly learnt that when we opened the door and stood by it, she needed to station in order to get pieces of food thrown to her.

Once she was stationing without hesitation, we put a set of scales underneath, and voila! Burrowing owl weights! We had never been able to weigh her before without catching her, which is something we avoid unless absolutely necessary. It's important to note here that her food intake was not actually reduced in order to get her to go to the station, it was just presented in smaller pieces so she was more likely to eat them straight away than taking them away to eat on a high branch or in a tunnel.

Following on from the rapid success of the scale training, I wondered if we could crate train her. I wanted to move her to a different aviary across the zoo and because of how far we'd come in less than a month, my team were keen to try.

We started the crate training PC also, and quickly got her running into a carry case. The trouble is you can't shut the door from outside the aviary! So we had to reduce one criteria and go back to stationing whilst moving ourselves into the aviary.

It took maybe 3 months in total from us entering the aviary to managing to move her. We had no time pressure on us from senior management, in fact we didn't even have to move her, and so we didn't rush. There were also days where we simply didn't have the time or manpower to do her training.

Since the first move we have managed to continue the scale training, and have in fact moved her twice more, using the crate training procedure. Each time it has taken us LESS time to get her into the carry case.

We have used the same idea to move a group of Yellow backed Chattering lorries *Lorius garrulus flavopalliatatus* into a new aviary, and a group of peach faced lovebirds *Agapornis roseicollis*, and we are working on getting several of our parrot species to take medication from a syringe.

Our breeding group of African penguins *Spheniscus demersus* are all trained to stand on scales one at a time, and to stand on a clear box with a mirror in it so we can check the underside of their feet in a non-invasive manner. We are currently training them to let us touch their wings and ID tags so we can check or replace them without needing to manually restrain them.

I'm sure all of you are doing amazing husbandry training with the birds in your care, as well as for shows, but remember to pass on some of that knowledge and information to your 'non show' bird keeper colleagues in the hope that we can reduce the stress and improve the welfare in all of their lives too.