

## **A Protocol for Teaching a Parrot to Station (Stay Put!)**

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I consider it very important to teach my parrots to station. This means that the parrot stays on a selected perch or particular spot of my choosing, rather than jumping or flying off to be somewhere else, until I cue them otherwise. It means that I can make bird toys without interference from my feathered friends. It means that my woodwork doesn't incur more damage. It means that they get to earn lots of goodies for a very simple behavior. It's a win-win situation!

Teaching a parrot to station can be invaluable if you have a bird what wants to be on the floor, cavity seeking or chewing on your possessions.

Below I have outlined the protocol that I use. The principle involves making staying up on perches more valuable to the bird than going somewhere else or getting down on the floor.

- Situate the parrot on a perch that is fairly near to you. This perch should have food dishes and spots to hang toys that the parrot can access easily, without bending over.
- Provide him with one or two toys or activities that he really enjoys up on the perch. This will give him the first good reason to stay there. A foraging project is a good choice for this, but you can use anything that your parrot enjoys. If you are stuck for ideas and your parrot doesn't interact much with enrichment, try just a whole roll of white, unscented toilet paper stuffed with little treats.
- As he stays put on the play stand, walk over and offer reinforcers (rewards) frequently. If your parrot won't take a treat from your fingers, just drop it onto one of the food dishes. Use a *variable duration schedule of reinforcement* as described below. If using food treats, keep the size of the treats as small as you can, since he will be receiving these frequently. If your parrot doesn't want treats, you can use any small thing he might like to receive.
  - In the beginning you might deliver reinforcers at intervals like this: two seconds, five seconds, ten seconds, eight seconds, three seconds, twelve seconds, etc. They will need to be offered pretty frequently at first. If you see your bird starting to focus elsewhere like he's thinking about getting down, step up the frequency of your reinforcer delivery.
  - As you see that he is remaining on the perch for longer periods of time, you can begin to increase the space of time between reinforcers, although you must keep offering them with timing that ensures he can't predict when the next one might be coming his way.
- In addition to rewarding him for staying put, we also need to deal effectively with him when he gets down. For this, we use the "three strikes and you're out" approach:
  - If the parrot starts to get down, wait until one foot hits the floor and then go over immediately to step him up. Don't give him a lot of social attention; in other words, no scolding. Remain quiet, but friendly, and put him right back where he was and give him a reward for stepping back off your hand.
  - Then, go back to rewarding him for staying where you want him.
  - The second time he gets down, respond the same way. Go over and immediately step him up to replace him on the perch he left and go back to rewarding him for staying put.
  - The third time he gets down, go over immediately to step him up and put him back into his cage with the door shut. Again, just be quiet, calm and friendly.
  - Then, if you have the time to continue, please let him back out again in 10 to 15 minutes to try it again. It will be normal for the bird to make mistakes in the

beginning. This is a process of learning for him, as he begins to understand that staying put earns him lots of good things and that getting down ends the fun.

While this is a very specific protocol using a particular perch, a more generalized approach can be used with flighted parrots who enjoy a great deal of liberty when out of their cages. This is the case in my home. My birds are at liberty most of the time, since I work at home. Accordingly, I want them to perch on their “furniture,” not mine.

Therefore, my morning routine always includes a fist full of sunflower seeds stuffed into a pocket and a pile of junk mail close at hand. As I take hourly breaks from my work, I check on my parrots. Any that are perched where I would like them to be receive a treat. Any that are perched on the laundry basket or other non-approved “perch” get nothing. As a result, my birds mostly stay where they should. It makes my life a lot easier!