

# Squawk 'n Talk

February 2020



## February 16<sup>th</sup>

Overcoming Fear by Heidi Hellmuth

Gateway Parrot Club Monthly Meeting  
meeting at 1:00 · presentation at 2:00

[WWW.GATEWAYPARROTCLUB.ORG](http://WWW.GATEWAYPARROTCLUB.ORG)



Heidi has dedicated her entire career to animal care and has extensive knowledge of almost all species of animals. She is the curator of the Primate House at the St. Louis Zoo. All her presentations are very informative with valuable information. In February, the title of her presentation is "Overcoming fear - strategies for working with nervous animals and dealing with unwanted behaviors" This presentation will offer tools and strategies for doing training and enrichment with nervous or fearful animals; problem solving; and dealing with aggression and other unwanted or abnormal behaviors. You don't want to miss Heidi!

Meetings are at Varietees Bird Store, Valley Park, MO at 1:00 p.m. You don't have to be a member of Gateway Parrot Club to come.

We would love to have you as our guest. You are welcome to bring your bird(s). The only requirement is that your birds' wings be clipped (for their safety). If fully flighted, please keep them in a carrier. Business meeting begins at 1:00; food served at 1:30; program at 2:00; raffle drawings after program.

## **MARK YOUR CALENDARS!**

Gateway Parrot Club 2020 Meeting Dates

**February 16**

**March 15**

**April 19**

**May 17**

**June 14**

**July 19**

**August TBD**

**September 20**

**October 18**

**November 15**

**December 13**

Gateway Parrot Club typically meets on the third Sunday of each month, with the exception of June and December when we will be meeting on the second Sunday. In August, our monthly meeting will be replaced by an event at Tower Grove Park.



## Chirps from the President's Perch

Our thanks to Steve Johnson, and his assistant, for his presentation titled "Anatomy of a Training Session" at our January meeting.

The February speaker will be Heidi Hellmuth and she will be presenting "Overcoming Fear - Strategies for working with nervous animals and dealing with unwanted behaviors".

Heidi's presentation will offer tools and strategies for training and enrichment with nervous or fearful animals; problem solving; and dealing with aggression and other unwanted or abnormal behaviors. We hope you are able to join us on February 16.

During the February meeting the Gateway Parrot Club will take nominations for organizations to receive our annual grants. In the past we have provided grants to organizations, such as, World Bird Sanctuary, Association of Avian Veterinarians, Saving the Blues, Missouri Wildlife Rescue, Texas A & M (Research), etc. At the March meeting we will vote for a total of three organizations.

We would appreciate your suggestions for potential speakers and topics of interest for our Monthly Meetings. The primary mission of the Gateway Parrot Club is education. Please let us know your interests.

We hope to see you at our next meeting on February 16<sup>th</sup>, at 1:00.

Renee Davis  
February 2020

## A few pictures from our January meeting:

Our thanks to Stephen Johnson for speaking to the club despite not feeling well due to the bug that has been lasting for weeks.

*"Thank you Stephan Johnson. Wonderful information, it reconfirmed one thing I am trying to do is the right thing"*

*"Stephen, I really enjoyed it. I hope to use your training info for both Leto and my little dog"*





## General Meeting Information

Come and enjoy the fun and bring a bird (as long as it is clipped). It's so enjoyable seeing all the different species of parrots and talking to other parrot owners.

You don't have to be a member to attend, but we would love to have you join. Meeting starts at 1:00 and it will be a full afternoon of meeting, socializing, eating, program, and raffle. For members who have not renewed their membership or who would like to join, please see Beth Poll, our membership chair person. She will be at the meeting to sign you up. An annual membership fee of \$20.00 includes your family (two voting members) and brings you our monthly newsletter by email, helps us to provide special speakers, and enables us to provide grants to other not for profit organizations. Thank you for joining and helping support the parrot community in St. Louis.

We meet at Varietees Bird Store, 60 Meramec Valley Plaza, Valley Park, MO. Varietees will be open in the afternoon so you can purchase bird food, supplies, toys, cages, play stands, etc.

We do have a raffle most months so if you would like to donate item(s), they are always welcome. They do not have to be bird related. We sell raffle tickets for \$1.00 each or 6 for \$5.00.

Did you know that the Gateway Parrot Club has a Facebook group page? If you would like to join this group, search for "Gateway Parrot Club" in Facebook and request membership. We have over 700 group members! Also check out our website: [gatewayparrotclub.org](http://gatewayparrotclub.org)

For our February meeting, Chef Christine will be supplying the fixings for make-your-own tacos. There will be quite a variety of ingredients: soft and hard taco shells, meat, cheese, lettuce, tomato, and sour cream. She will also be making refried beans and guacamole and a cake for dessert. As always, there will be water and an assortment of soda. If you would like to bring a food items to share, please do. Come hungry because usually we have an abundance of food.

# **Gateway Parrot Club**



## **Meeting Dates - 2020**

**January 19, Stephen Johnson, "Anatomy of a Training Session"**

**February 16, Heidi Hellmuth, "Overcoming Fear, Strategies for working with nervous animals and dealing with unwanted behaviors"**

**March 15, Dr. Michelle Whitehead, DVM (Blue Pearl)**

**April 19**

**May 17**

**June 14**

**\* Meeting will be on 2nd Sunday**

## **Membership Report (Beth Poll)**

It's that time of year to renew your membership for 2020. You can do it online, at the meeting, or via snail mail. If you renewed at the August bird fair, your membership will run through 2020. Members who have not paid their dues by January 31 will no longer be in good standing and will not be able to vote on club matters.

# Liberty and Control

as risk factors for

## Feather Damaging Behavior

## Risk Factors for Feather Damaging Behavior



Susan with my dog Rika

I had the honor last summer of listening to Dr. Susan G. Friedman give a lecture on *control*. What she had to say blew my mind and I continue to be as excited today by the ideas presented then – not only because what I heard was new, but because they reverberated within me as truth.

To paraphrase what Dr. Friedman had to say: *Behavior is the way that we control outcomes. When we behave, we move the environment in such a way that we are able to access reinforcers (things we value) and escape aversives (things we want to avoid).*

*When we, or any animal, performs a behavior, it is like tossing a stone into a river. A ripple is created. There is no way not to create a ripple when tossing the stone, just like there is no way not to influence the environment when we behave.*

*Learning is what we were born to do and the ability to learn is a product of natural selection. It is in our nature to control our outcomes. Therefore, the need for control is a part of our biology. There is a biological need for control. Therefore, **control is a primary reinforcer**, as vital to our parrot's quality of life as food or water.*

# Control is a Biological Need

We know that all animals exercise control by making choices. I have argued for years that by increasing the number of choices that our parrots are able to make, we are increasing their quality of life.

Lauren A. Leotti and her co-authors expand upon this idea by saying, “Belief in one’s ability to exert control over the environment and to produce desired results is essential for an individual’s well-being. It has been repeatedly argued that the perception of control is not only desirable, but it is likely a psychological and biological necessity.” They go on to state that “the restriction of choice is aversive.” (Leotti, 2010).

## Lack of Control is Aversive



Not only is it aversive, it can result in the condition of *learned helplessness*. This is a state of behavior in which the animal stops even trying to make choices. How many times have we described a parrot as a “perch potato?” The perch potato is manifesting a version of learned helplessness.

Expanding upon this idea, they write: “In the absence of other stressors, however, the removal of choice, in and of itself, can be very stressful. It has been found that the restriction of behaviors, particularly behaviors that are highly valued by a species, contributes to behavioral and physiological manifestations of stress. It seems that the aversive effects of captivity may depend upon the extent to which behavioral choices have been reduced relative to what could be performed in the natural environment.” (Leotti, 2010)

# New Perceptions



In the past few years, I have come to see our parrot-keeping practices in a new light. We have taken flighted spirits, clipped their wings, and put them in cages. Many parrots spend all of their time in their cage, or have at most, one or two hours out each day. We have taken away their liberty, which is essential for exercising choice.

If we kept dogs in a similar manner, rendering them unable to move in a way natural to them and keeping them in kennels for 22 hours every day, it would be considered abuse. However, these practices are still commonplace in the parrot world, rarely being brought into question. We appear unable to judge the inappropriateness of these practices since they have been accepted as normal for so long.

# The Problem with Conventional Wisdom



The explanation for this lies in the phenomenon called *conventional wisdom*. Conventional wisdom is a collection of beliefs that are convenient and comfortable to people, such that they are able to resist facts that might diminish those very beliefs. (Wikipedia, 2019) I once heard someone say: *A belief is an emotional commitment to an idea. As soon as you have a belief, you are automatically in denial in regards to any information that comes to you to the contrary.*

Our conventional wisdom, when it comes to our companion parrots, is causing them harm. Dr. Friedman stated in her presentation, “A lack of control is a major risk factor for feather damaging behavior.” I could not agree more.

## Feather Damaging Behavior

I have specialized in helping clients whose birds damage their feathers since 1996 and have given considerable thought to the causes. The list of *non-medical* causes I compiled years ago in an [article for the World Parrot Trust](#) included (1) inappropriate diet, (2) chronic stress or anxiety, (3) increased production of reproductive hormones, (4) lack of independent play skills that leads to boredom or over-dependence on the owner, (5) inadequate bathing opportunities, (6) lack of adequate rest, (7) insufficient exercise, (8) insufficient opportunity for learning and making choices, (9) lack of foraging and other “discovery” opportunities, (10)

lack of access to fresh air and sunshine, and (11) foreign substances on feathers or exposure to toxic materials, such as cigarette smoke.

Today, my list reads as follows:

- Chronic stress resulting from lack of choice making opportunities, especially as this relates to natural behaviors (foraging, flying, bathing, problem solving, enjoying fresh air and sunshine), and an overall lack of liberty and control
- Inappropriate diet
- Increased production of reproductive hormones
- Inferior juvenile rearing conditions

I had two experiences this past year that appear to support my new view. Two female greys that I raised close to 20 years ago needed a change of homes. One came back to me to stay and the other went to a client of mine. Both greys had previously enjoyed really good homes – they had large cages, were flighted, ate nutritious diets, got plenty of enrichment, and had access to outdoor aviaries. However, they both spent too many hours in their cages.

Both had extensive feather damage over their torsos at the time of rehoming. Now, both are fully feathered. In their current homes, they still have cages, but they enjoy a great deal more liberty, which results in the ability to make choices at an exponential rate. Both birds also had the advantage of excellent early rearing experiences and wonderful first homes. It appears that greater control over choices was the one factor that was significantly different in these new homes.

## **Unethical Practices Harm Us as Well**

Given the above, it should be clear that the *typical* manner in which we keep parrots is destructive to their physical and psychological health. However, it harms us as well.

How are we harmed by our own behavior? We fail to appreciate that depriving a captive parrot of the ability to move around at choice, to fly, has an ethical component. Therefore, we are able to behave unethically while still maintaining a positive self-image.

However, there *are* many who are uncomfortable on some level. A good many clients have confided to me that they feel terrible that their parrots live in cages and display behaviors consistent with learned helplessness. This requires action.

# Feasible Changes



Conventional wisdom is resistant to change. So, how can we begin? Where do we start?

Grand sweeping gestures are prone to failure. It is not feasible to abandon the use of cages or release them all out “into the wild.”

This is a complex subject and behavior is a *study of one*. This true both for us and our birds. What is possible in one home may not be possible in another.

However, as Kurtyca suggests, “...although we cannot offer them complete control over all aspects of their environment, perhaps by offering choices within the confines of captivity, we can give some small amount of control, and thus increase their wellbeing.” (Kurtycz, 2015)

“One of the putative sources of stress in captivity is interference with or prevention of animals’ engagement in species-typical behaviors for which they appear to have a “behavioral need.” (Morgan, 2006)

## Species-typical Behaviors

Might this be the best place to begin our efforts? Species-typical behaviors for parrots include flying, foraging and problem solving, social interactivity, perching up high, chewing wood and other materials, bathing, interacting with the natural environment, and mating and rearing young.

It is only the last that we cannot afford to encourage in the companion parrot home. When we have done so in the past, most often the results have been disastrous.

## Flight

As I have argued many times, wings should never be clipped unless absolutely necessary and certainly not for human convenience. Instead, our own homes and behavior must be modified in order to support their flighted status.

## Foraging and Other Enrichment

If a parrot did not learn to forage when young, he will not understand the concept of hidden food. This then will need to be patiently taught. In regards to other enrichment, a wide variety of chewable items can be provided – cloth, palm frond toys, wood that is easy to chew, cardboard and paper, bells. A parrot regains a bit of control over his environment when he can choose the items with which he interacts.

## The Natural Environment

I no longer regard as optional the provision of a *safe* space outdoors where a parrot can enjoy the natural environment. Notice that I used italics for the word “safe.”

I did so because there are problems with putting birds outdoors in carriers or cages. The small dimensions of both may cause stress, since the parrot perceives a lack of ability for escape should a predator be seen. The width of cage bars could allow a predator access to the parrot. Both must be used only with close supervision.

An aviary is, of course, the ideal. However, if this is not possible, other options must be considered. The stimulation of natural sunshine and breezes not only encourages good psychological health, the exposure to sunlight encourages good physical health.

## Social Connectivity

We can offer a captive parrot greater control over his social interactions when we watch his body language carefully and then create greater distance if the signs indicate that this is his desire. We can decrease his stress by leaving plenty of room between the cages if multiple parrots of different species reside in one home.

We might also call into question the practice of keeping a single parrot. They are flocking creatures and, while they might be flexible enough to regard us and our other pets as a member of their flock, a single parrot often benefits from another bird in the home. No one should, however, get another parrot unless they *want* one.

## Access to Height



We can increase his perception of control by allowing him to perch up high, where he feels safer. This is accomplished by installing hanging perches in the ceiling.

Placing area rugs below will contain the mess, and reinforcing cued behaviors will ensure that you can retrieve him.

## Training Offers Control

One of the best ways we can give back control to a parrot is to live as a trainer, by providing frequent opportunities for earning reinforcers. Positive reinforcement training is the gold standard for behavior change. It provides enrichment. It makes our lives easier. It helps us learn to read body language.

There are many reasons to train a parrot. However, the greatest of these is that it affords the parrot a sense of *control*. He has control over his ability to access the things he desires. Here are a few specific things you might begin to do:

- Begin to teach specific behaviors, like targeting.
- Offer your parrot a reinforcer (small piece of preferred food) for every cued behavior.
- Embrace the **SMART x 50** approach to encouraging desirable behavior.

Kathy Sdao, ACAAB, owns [Bright Spot Dog Training](#) and developed the SMART x 50 program. Although published for dogs, this can easily be applied to parrot behavior. SMART is the acronym for See, Mark And Reward Training. The

numeral 50 refers to the goal of dispensing 50 reinforcers a day. (I think **this** amount may be excessive for a parrot, unless you can factor in some healthy choices.)

## **SMART x 50**

This program encourages owners to get into the habit of awareness regarding the desirable behaviors that their parrots perform on a daily basis. It relies on the assumption that every bird already performs many desirable behaviors during the course of any day and that we can strengthen these and increase quality of life for our birds in the process.

These are the steps:

- Count out 50 very small (no bigger than ½ the size of a pine nut), desirable treats.
- Put these in a pocket or small container for easy access.
- When you see or hear your parrot perform a cute or desirable behavior, mark this with one distinct word, such as “Yes!” (Examples: desirable noises, singing, interacting with enrichment, responding to cues such as “step up.”)
- Deliver the treat.
- Use up to 50 treats a day, but don’t feel badly if 10 are all you are able to dispense.
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In using this, I have seen a distinct change in all of my animals. They become more interactive and enthusiastic in their demeanor. And, don’t be surprised if yours begin to toss out some new behaviors, just to see if those might also earn something.

## **The Next Decade**

Jacques Deval once wrote “God loved the birds and invented trees. Man loved the birds and invented cages.”

Although true, I think this is a horrible little quote. Perhaps I find it so because of the truth he spoke. Let’s put the lie to those words in the next decade and strive for practices that allow for more liberty and control for our parrots. Each of us can just take one reasonable, do-able step at a time.

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## **Pamela Clark, CPBC**

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