

This column is strictly for the birds

Animal lovers cannot help but talk about their pets. It's an inbred trait. I admit I'm guilty. I occasionally give my pets a little too much ink. Nonetheless, I have always loved parrots. They are not just entertaining; they are interesting. They are capable of cognitive thought that goes well beyond instinct. I think most parrot owners will support that belief.

I have an African Grey parrot named Kongo. African Greys are allegedly the most intelligent species of parrots. They have been domesticated for over 4,000 years and are capable of vocabularies amounting to hundreds of words. Some are even multi-lingual. Experts estimate the intelligence of a mature African Grey to be about that of a five-year-old child.

Most parrots are great mimics. However, the talent that sets African Greys apart from other species is their ability to speak in short sentences and phrases. They often respond appropriately and conversationally.

For instance, a lady I know who has an African Grey was sitting on her couch knitting. The bird was on her shoulder when he started chewing on the upholstery piping on the back of the couch. She said, "You better stop that or I'm going to put you to bed." The bird looked up and said, "So what!"

One of the drawbacks of their intellect is that they have a mind of their own. African Greys are known to be manipulative, stubborn, inventive, and practical jokers. Those who own them will attest to one common trait. You might think you are training your bird. Be careful, because it won't be long before you realize that your bird is training you. African Greys are famous for it.

Kongo responds to training



You can't beat a system you can't understand

By Sam Bari

when I try to teach him a word or phrase. However, he always learns on his terms. And he's very selective. In other words, he learns the words, phrases and sounds that he wants to learn, and the words might not be the ones I'm trying to teach him. He's designed a communication system that employs words, sound effects, and signals.

He figured out that I respond to the ding, ding, ding on my microwave oven, the signal that a cooking cycle has finished. Kongo noticed that whenever he heard the dinging, I responded by going to the microwave. Now, he just imitates the microwave when he wants me to come to him.

Whenever he does a trick, or does as he is told, I'll say, "Good boy!" and reward him with a small treat. Whenever he wants a nut, or a treat, he'll rock back and forth on his perch and sometimes give a wolf whistle. I've learned to understand his body language. When I do what he wants and give him a nut, he also says, "Good boy!" Hmmm . . . Who's training who here?

When he talks, he sounds exactly like me. It's unnerving. If he learns a word from another source, he sounds like the person who said it. He doesn't have a parrot voice. He sounds human.

This uncanny ability turned out to be a big drawback for my friend Michel, who owns an African Grey.

Michel had an African Grey named Mango. Michel got married and kept Mango's perch and big cage not far from the door to a small guest bedroom in the house he bought for his bride. When they had a baby a few years later, the room became a nursery.

Mango quickly learned that whenever the baby cried, both Michel and his wife would immediately run into the room. So Mango learned to cry. Sometimes the baby cried loudly. So Mango learned to cry loudly. And Michel and Karen always responded.

When Michel was offered a job on the other side of the country, he and his family had to move. After the moving truck picked up their belongings, they stayed with relatives for a few days and Karen flew to their new home with the baby. Michel left a few days later, and brought Mango with him.

Mango's travel carrier looked like a piece of luggage with backpack straps. The sides could be zipped so it was dark inside. When African Grey's are in the dark, they generally sleep, so Michel kept the sides zipped and Mango slept quietly until they went through security and into the waiting area where they had to spend an hour before departing.

With all the jostling and outside noise, Mango couldn't sleep, so he started talking quietly. Michel picked up the carrier and sat it in his lap and talked to Mango to keep him calm. Other passengers looked at Michel and they thought a crazy man was talking to his luggage.

Apparently, Mango wasn't happy and wanted to see what was going on, so he started crying. The other passengers in the waiting area started moving away from them because they thought Michel

had a baby in the suitcase.

Of course, Michel wasn't paying attention until he realized that he was sitting alone with his suitcase and two airport security guards were standing in front of him looking very stern and not amused. Mango kept crying, louder and louder. A female security guard joined them and asked Michel to please give her the baby.

Michel realized he was in big trouble and tried to explain himself. The woman again said, "Please give me the suitcase and we won't hurt the child." Michel grabbed the zipper and opened the case to reveal Mango inside the bird carrier. As soon as Mango saw the woman, he let out a wolf whistle and said, "Hi, sweetie!" in a very loud voice that sounded just like Michel.

The security guards thought the incident was hilarious. The passengers who called the security guards were embarrassed. Michel was relieved. Mango was happy.

Even birds manage to survive life with humans as they live in a system they can't understand.

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