

talking to birds

A budgie breeder since he was a kid, Don Burke shares a lifetime's experience with his tips on how to handle and talk to pet birds.

words **don burke**

Birds incessantly communicate. They talk to each other and to us. They can't help themselves.

Birds communicate with their voices (all birds have two voices, not one like us). And yes, they normally use both voices together. Most of their communicating is done with body language: posturing, dancing or making eye, beak or other movements. These are easy to learn as they are consistent among all members of a bird species and fairly consistent across all bird species.

Scared birds pull all of their feathers closer to their bodies, ready for rapid escape by flying. Angry or aggressive birds may erect a crest their head feathers, crouch low or open their beaks. Sexed-up birds will often fly to a perch, poke out their chest, erect themselves to their full tippy-toed height and maybe even jump up and down. Males in particular do this.

In contrast, human behaviour changes almost daily. This is very confusing and frightening for birds. Sometimes we amble slowly into an aviary gazing at one beautiful bird. Other times we race in with a seed bucket, staring at the seed dish since we are in a hurry. Often we spring out from behind a wall and scare the bejesus out of them. Crazy people these humans, their body language is all over the place.

Don's budgies know when he is approaching, as he whistles his special 'I'm visiting' tune.

DON'S TOP TIPS To stop yourself being so weird and confusing, you will need to develop a daily system which your pet birds can understand and learn to trust.

1. Announce yourself:

when approaching the aviary, call out or whistle a specific note or two that says: "Hi guys, can I come inside?" Everything from here on in is all about good manners. Bad manners terrify your birds and many bird breeders have awful manners.

2. Learn smooth, slowish movements:

predators rapidly strike or dive at birds, friends move smoothly and create calm and confidence. All good horse handlers do this with horses. Like birds, horses are prey animals. That is, they run away or fly away from predators.

3. Set up aviary rules: I generally avoid the back area of the aviary where the tiered perches are located. The birds know that they are safe there. If I must bob under to get to the back to clean the floor or whatever, I slowly bend down and look up at the birds. Most have learned to slowly fly to the front of the aviary to get out of

my way. I have good manners and wait 10 or 20 seconds till the 'all clear' is sounded, then under I go to clean up.

4. Don't be a snake: snakes are one of the main predators of birds, along with hawks. Birds are programmed to panic at the very sight of a snake. Anything long, thin and moving is a snake – it must be! No bird is likely to hang around to decide if a long, thin, moving thing is actually a snake: by then, if it is a snake, the bird would be dead.

You have two snakes – one either side of your shoulders (we call them arms). Flail your arms around and your birds will shit themselves, quite literally. This is a fair description of you too, that is how you are behaving. The broom that you use to sweep out the aviary is also a snake. Just watch how your birds behave. They fly around like mad, trying to escape.

So, put your hands in your pockets when you look at birds in small cages. If you must use a stick to get them up on the perch, remember that the stick,



QUARRIONS Also called cockatiels, these native birds can be very talkative.



GOOD MANNERS Talking to birds is all about earning their trust.

too is a snake. So approach the bird slowly with the stick from *below* the cage. Predators like hawks and tree snakes strike from above.

5. Stop being a bully: to get birds in cages to work with you, make training fun. Most bird trainers are bullies and this yields bad results.

To get a bird on a perch, most people poke at the poor bird on the floor until they can lift or scare it up onto the perch. This scares the bird even more, so the bird is inclined to jump off the perch back onto the floor. You bloody bully! A better way is to use the scientifically proven 'advance and retreat' method. Apply gentle pressure with the stick until the bird moves towards the perch, or even looks at it. Rapidly move away, retreating one step. Repeat this a number of times, always rapidly retreating, but expecting a little more each time till the bird realises that happiness is found only on the perch.

Never approach the cage rapidly – always do it slowly. Also, don't stare at the bird, at least not at first. Predators stare at you just before they kill you.

6. Catching and netting:

be honest about this. Don't trick your birds. Adopt an "I'm going to catch you" whistle note, or way of walking or even a word or phrase like "Look out". Don't hide your net. Focus your eyes on the bird you wish to catch. The others will probably see this and relax a bit. They can tell which bird in the flock the hawk is chasing. Very soon, when you are in the aviary for other reasons, your birds will trust you since they recognise your body language that says: "I'm not going to catch or eat you".

7. Warn your friends: by now your budgies will be becoming your friends. So knock before you enter. Whenever you do anything like inspecting a nest box, tap three times on the box. Most birds will learn to go out of the box when you tap. This cuts down on fear and escapes.

8. Play games: try going into your aviary (especially the young birds' aviary) with a handful of green seeding grasses or other treats. Hold the treats near the perch and soon one confident bird will steal some seed. Gradually withdraw the seed and wait motionless till one bird lands on your arm. Within a few days, all of the birds will land all over you. This enables you to pick out your future champions or to assess the readiness of your flock to breed.



LARGER PARROTS & COCKATOOS

These birds have very interesting body language and some are as bright as chimpanzees. Often they have specialised greeting ceremonies that you can learn.

Most cockatoos have a meet and greet ceremony that is the equivalent of our handshake approach of an outstretched open hand and a broad smile. They chew their beaks while their feathers are relaxed, neither held tightly against the body nor held out erect. This means "Can I be your friend and come closer?" As an unknown bird approaches, if scared they stop chewing the beak and pull their feathers closer to their bodies. This means "back off".

You can copy this. If you want to approach a cockatoo, hold your index finger and thumb in a pinch position and rub the index finger along the tip of the thumb. This mimics the beak-chewing action. The bird should then chew its beak, so you are OK to approach. If the bird stops chewing and pulls in its feathers, take a step back immediately, but keep the chewing action going with your fingers. Wait till the bird fluffs up and starts chewing before you slowly

start to approach again. This advance and retreat usually convinces the bird that you have both good manners and intentions.

If the bird won't play this game, it is probably socially retarded and best left alone. I have used this method on seriously dangerous cockatoos with brilliant results. Some of these birds remain my best friends. By the way, a really nasty cockatoo or parrot is often much less dangerous when out of its cage. In the cage it will often attack all comers. Note that aggressive birds often fluff up their feathers all over, but especially around the head. This is a warning – stay away.

Dangerous cockatoos are usually the victims of bullying. Be aware though that Rule #1 of parrot, budgie and cockatoo training is never react to a bite. Pretend that no bite hurts. All parrots love the power of dominating a subordinate. Never give them that pleasure. Never hit or attack them either: be a benign, non-threatening friend.

When holding a smaller parrot like a budgie, I let them try to bite the tip of my fingernail. At the correct angle they can't secure a grip (much like another bird's beak, feathers or feet), so they tend to stop trying. Once they taste flesh, they can become dangerous.

BUILD TRUST:
this galah is an intelligent bird, so you'll need to earn its trust.



BACK TO BROOMS

Oh, I hear you asking, what about brooms – you said that they were snakes. I did. Show them the broom from outside the aviary; move it very slowly inside. Start brooming very slowly until they realise that it isn't a snake, then gradually speed up. But never sweep rapidly, this is a disastrous mistake.

FEEDING TIME This is a great way to build trust with your pet bird.



send us your tips

Well, that's a start. Please, if you have other techniques that you use, send them in so that other people can benefit from them. Remember, good manners are everything with birds. **BBY**