

QUAKERS ARE GREAT TALKERS

by Linda Greeson

During the years that I have been working with Quaker Parakeets I am often amazed at the stories about their abilities to talk reported to me by their loving owners.

"Shiloh is now one year old and talks up a storm. His first word was 'kisses' and a smooching sound at only two months of age." This is typical of the many letters I receive. I rarely hear complaints about a companion Quaker not talking after one year of age. "My ten month old Quaker named Barney says 53 different phrases which total 105 words" is more representative.

The mischievous nature of the Quaker is often reflected in his speech. Many will quickly learn to say "Ouch!" or "Stop that!" before giving the owner a little bite. They follow this with delighted laughter. It is difficult to get angry no matter how much the pinch stings.

I have never been able to decide which is most important in teaching a bird to talk - innate inherited ability or the techniques used and amount of time spent in teaching. My own experiences are of no help in making this heredity versus environment judgement. I am so busy with the care of breeding birds I rarely have time to spare for more than casual teaching efforts. About the only special effort that I routinely make to encourage talking is to use the same phrases I want the bird to learn with each contact. My voice is naturally quite loud and clear. When offering a slice of apple I repeat "I love apples.". It does not take long before your friends are impressed by your bird's response to the offer of a treat. It may be some time before the most clever Quaker distinguishes between apple, cracker, or veggie, but with time and patience this will happen.

When hand feeding my baby birds I always talk to them. This is as much a part of my routine as preparing the feeding formula. Almost always, one or two in a clutch will clearly be repeating my " Mmm mmm good." or "Want more?" before they are weaned. Others will pick up my greeting of "Hello guys!" later in the larger cages as they are learning

to eat on their own. Although I have kept no detailed records of this, I know that some of the babies, who did nothing more than squawk for food during their stay with me, later delighted their owners by speaking in complete sentences.

I have observed that those owners of pet birds, not only Quakers, who are most successful in training their birds to communicate often fit a pattern. These people are usually quite talkative themselves and naturally have clear, expressive speech. They often tend to exaggerate verbally. They just naturally talk a lot, not only to family and friends but to their birds as well.

Talking skills in companion birds are not limited to those owned by people with these characteristics. Quakers will pick up words and phrases they hear frequently, sing simple little songs, whistle, or imitate other birds and animals with no effort at all by the owner at teaching.

There are times when this ability to mimic is not altogether appreciated. After some time out on the patio our talking birds are often busy whinnying like the horses in the nearby pasture. Back in the living room, until they get off on another kick, you could readily assume that the horses were stabled in the house.

Although Quakers speak clearly and are readily understood, they lack the ability of the larger birds for perfect imitation of human voices. When my African Gray calls out "Come on in." in response to a knock on the door his voice is mine in every respect. Neighbors find it hard to believe that I am not the one welcoming them in. The pet Quaker mimics the Gray's words perfectly but does not quite make the pitch and tone needed to fool the neighbors.

All parrots do learn readily from each other. At one time we had a few birds in our aviaries who had been raised in Spanish speaking homes. The Quakers in adjacent cages were soon calling out "Como esta?" and "Que pasa!" with quite credible Spanish accents.

I have often been asked why these birds so quickly pick up the undesirable words they only hear occasionally. I think this is because when profanity is used it is invariably with considerable emphasis.

Quakers are equally quick to learn to whistle and sing simple tunes. Another "short cut" for busy owners is to sing the same little song when working around the cages. Your pet will surprise you by sitting quietly, head cocked to one side, while you are entertaining him and later will give you back your song.

Parrots are considered by many who study these things to be of higher intelligence than dogs. It follows then that any emotionally well adjusted parrot can be trained successfully at any stage in life. Training in the later stages must progress more slowly than when working with a developing baby but is not impossible. With the life span of a Quaker being estimated at thirty or forty years, the introduction of an older bird to the family is not uncommon.

Quakers have remarkably long memories. They will naturally use familiar frequently heard sounds and phrases but they often surprise us by unexpectedly clearly repeating an expression not heard for years. This may be in the voice of a former owner as is the case of a little Quaker hen I have set up for breeding. Normally my husband assumes the task of servicing the cages in our aviaries. On the rare occasions that I take over this duty, as I open the cage door, I hear a perfect imitation of the former owner's sweet little voice saying "Be careful now!". This is followed by a good imitation of my own laugh.

Some years ago we repeated "Merry Christmas" and "Happy New Year" to our little group of pet birds often enough to have them all calling out greetings all through the holidays. Shortly after the holidays they dropped these phrases, probably because there was no pleasant reaction to their efforts. When the holiday season came around again, it was the Quaker who, with just slight encouragement, started them all on greetings again.

With few exceptions Quakers seem to start quickly adding to their vocabularies at about one year of age. They continue to learn new words and phrases. My impression is that additional small accomplishments continue almost indefinitely.

The physical characteristics of a parrot rarely show evidence of the bird's age. A Quaker of quite advanced years may show some evidence

of age by scaly legs or a more horny beak, but rarely by diminished activity. The elderly bird will continue to perform whatever has been learned over the years and to occasionally add something new. With patience you can teach an old bird new tricks, and new words.

Your Quaker may not be one who learns to talk in sentences or sing several verses of a song. Just the experience of approaching his cage in the morning and being greeted by a bright eyed little creature saying "Good morning, Honey!" makes the whole companion bird experience worthwhile. They do not have to be bird geniuses to be loved.