

Contact Calls

The Communication Link With Our Parrots

By

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I'm a fervent believer that we should understand our birds' wild nature, using that understanding to help the birds and us adapt to each other. Sometimes we must learn to think and *talk* parrot to further the trust relationship between us. Talking parrot includes the use and understanding of one of the most important parts of a wild parrot's life -- *contact calls*.

Contact calls back and forth between parrot and human help reassure the parrot that its human is within earshot, as would be a wild flock member. They give parrots a way to let us know when they want our immediate attention. Contact calls also serve to reassure our parrots that, although we may be leaving them behind as we go off to work or to the grocery store, we will come back to them. Understanding and using contact calls is a good way to avoid behavioral problems, like screaming. Often screaming behaviors develop from natural, instinctive contact calls that go unanswered by the parrot's human flock members and escalate into screams when the frustrated parrot cannot make its needs understood with simple contact calls.

Not long ago I saw another good reason to initiate and return contact calls with our parrots. My mother's peach face lovebird, Peaches, although clipped, can get around the house just fine. My mother has had Peaches for almost 6 years and they are very close. Peaches likes to go into the bedroom and chatter to the wild birds outside. If my mother wants to know where Peaches is, she says, "Peaches, where are you?" Peaches always returns this *contact call* with lovebird chatter and often flies to where my mother is in the house.

If Peaches is in the front room and my mother opens a door to step outside, she always puts the lovebird in her cage. However, the other day Peaches was in the bedroom talking to the outside birds and my mother thought that would preoccupy her as my mother opened the door just enough to pick up the paper. Not so. Peaches was apparently waiting for just this opportunity -- a chance to visit up close and personal with her outside friends. She flew over my mother's head and out the door -- straight to the top of a tree with some other birds.

Thankfully, my mother doesn't panic and went outside calling "Peaches, where are you?" Although Peaches appeared not frightened by being outside and eager to fly with the other birds as she traveled from tree top to tree top, she still answered my mother's contact call -- allowing my mother to track her movements. A few blocks and a half-hour later, Peaches finally tired of her adventure and flew down to my mother, who was patiently standing under a big tree calling her. So, everything is well and Peaches gets put in her cage now, before any door opens -- no matter where she is. There's no question that she would try it again if given the chance. However, thanks to a contact call, she is safely home and won't have that opportunity again.

I have no doubt that a consistently used contact call between any parrot and owner might make the difference between a parrot lost forever and a bird found and returned safely home. Most parrots don't have the wild abandonment to adventure that Peaches had and would return quickly to their human flock if they had a contact call to home in on. Of course, no one likes to think of anything like that happening, but accidents happen -- even when we do our best to anticipate and prevent them.

Two kinds of calls - ours and the parrot's natural call

Do our parrots actually understand what we say to them and what they say to us?

They probably do -- to some degree. Much like a young child learning to associate words with actions, parrots do associate some of our speech with actions. Dr. Irene Pepperberg has certainly shown this with her work with Alex and other grey parrots. My own Timneh grey, Jing, associated the word *up* with going somewhere, because when I use the 'up' command I usually take her somewhere, even if only a few feet away. Because she associates this sound/word with going or moving, she says "up" when she wants me to go to her and take her somewhere she wants to go. I respond appropriately to her call and the pattern is set. Now, she has a cognitive speech pattern -- at least when she wants me to drop everything and transport her somewhere. She only uses "up" for this purpose, not even repeating it as vocalization sometimes associated with mimicry.

However, is the parrot who says "Bye-bye" when you leave or "Hello" when you come home actually greeting you with words he understands the meaning of, or repeating your contact calls because you always say "Bye-bye" when you leave? It is probably a combination of both. Certainly, the parrot will start associating "Bye-bye" with leaving. However, if he really understands the word's meaning he will start saying it when he wants you to leave, not just as a reassurance contact call that says everything's all right and you will be back. For instance, Jing knows that when I say "Are you ready?" we are soon going to go somewhere together -- something she enjoys immensely. On many occasions, when Jing wants to go and I'm not ready, she will yell at me "Are ya ready!!!" However, she doesn't use this sentence with any other vocalizing.

The results of a survey I did on the PBR Internet mailing list were very interesting, regarding parrots' ability to adopt our human contact calls as their own.

One respondent writes: "My seven month old Congo African grey Mazi, does a "yoo-hoo" whistle when I leave the room, but only if I haven't said "See you later" (as I go upstairs to my office) or "Bye-bye" if I leave in the car."

Here is a bird that apparently waits for its human to initiate the call and uses its own call if it doesn't hear the person's "See you later" call. Going to the office is obviously different to the person, who changes the contact call to "Bye-bye" when leaving the house. The parrot recognizes the different call and associates it with leaving the house, so uses the same call as does her human when the person leaves the house.

The following is an instance of a bird that may have associated a contact call used between humans as a call that it should also use with its human flock.

"Shadow, seems to know when we are leaving to go out in the car, or even if just one of us leaves. We always go out the kitchen door, and if Shadow is in her cage in the family room, she will say "Good-bye, dear" each and every time. She never misses."

Sometimes, the human learns to speak the bird's language, especially if it's a parrot species that does not imitate human language as well as other species. Or, sometimes it's fun to simply *talk* parrot talk. For instance, my good friend Pam Clark, who breeds African greys, when talking about her own companion grey, Rollo.

"Upon my return, Rollo calls out "Hello" as I come through the door. Rollo is the only one who really keeps track of my whereabouts. Throughout the day, he will double-check his perceptions by whistling. I answer with an imitation of his whistle, which he then bounces back to me in a slightly changed version. We usually keep this up for several minutes until he is satisfied."

Apparently different people merit different contact calls, each suited to that particular person. Barbara Carroll writes, "We have a male friend who visits us every weekend. The Congo grey is used to and fairly tolerant of his presence in our apartment and now appears to have fashioned yet another call--a slightly fractured version of my greeting. He uses it only when our friend John is here. This friend -- not a bird person -- did notice this and remarked, 'Hey, that's *my* greeting that he (the grey) always gives me!'"

If you say something enough times in conjunction with a specific action, it will become communication for that action. Guess what this bird probably heard right before being let out of its cage?

"My husband's Yellow-nape amazon says "Let Pedro out of prison" when she wants out to play."

Our birds are also able to learn bird-like calls that we teach them. I didn't care much for Jing's natural, shrill contact call, so taught her a three note whistle that resembles some natural African grey whistles. She learned it immediately and, just as quickly associated it as a contact call. Now my life and hearing is much better, as we call back and forth with *my* whistle, not hers.

Another survey respondent replies, "My eight month old grey either whistles a specific whistle I taught her to use (which I respond with), or says 'Come Here!' which is something she picked up from my two year old saying 'come here, Mama'."

Esther Pasqual writes, " My two birds do two different things that I would consider contact calls. Buffy, my three-year -old Citron, began her adventures at my house by screaming every time I left *her* room. As she learned to talk, the screams were replaced with 'Mommy right back After a while, she learned to say 'Bye-bye'."

Buffy is obviously a bird that quickly learned to talk *human* to make its contact calls understood.

Another person who adopted the parrot's language writes, "Floyd (Moluccan cockatoo) absolutely does have a contact call for leaving, and another for arriving and never mixes the two. However, they are mimics of his own natural whistles, chirps, and clicks that he made as a weaning baby. I picked up on them and started using them and they are now ingrained into his behavior."

One cockatoo has learned that children respond to certain contact calls -- their names -- when called and uses that knowledge to attract children to play with her. "My female Moluccan calls out for my son, his name is Christopher and she calls out for 'Ritopher'. When she wants attention and would like a kid to come play with her she uses her previous owner's child's name, (Devon) and calls out Ritopher and then Devon. She really likes kids, and when she wants their attention she tries to call their names."

Imitating Telephones and Microwave Ovens

Parrots are very observant and often notice what sounds their humans respond to. In the parrot's mind if a telephone contact calls to a person and the person goes to (answers) the phone, the parrot can also use the telephone sound to call its humans. Many African greys are adept at imitating telephone rings -- so much so that their people often answer the phone before realizing it was their bird making the sound.

A survey participant writes, " My four year old African grey, Ivy, has two different contact calls. If I just leave the room, but am still in the house, she calls, 'Woo, hoo. What do?' and keeps asking until I answer her. When I go out the front door, as soon as the door is shut, she imitates the ring of the telephone."

This bird apparently expects her owner to come back into the house to answer the phone, as she has probably done before.

Another person writes, "My Congo African grey, Dude, does the phone ring then says 'John, PHONE!' in my voice. Many times my husband would pick up the phone only to get a dial tone!"

Yes, parrots do have a sense of humor and this one may enjoy sending its human to the phone, over and over. Sometimes we try to trick our parrots, but we must be pretty wily to put something over on them, as evidenced by Jean Dale's African grey, Dooley.

"Dooley quickly learned to imitate the ringer on the phone and then discovered that I would come back into the living room to *answer* the phone. After several false calls, I wised up and began to wait for the second ring before coming back. This didn't stop Dooley. He very quickly learned to *ring* then wait the proper time and *ring* again. How did he figure out how to cause me to respond to his *call*?"

Several years ago I had a client whose African grey was driving him crazy making microwave oven beeps. This bird's cage was in the kitchen, so it watched its owner go to the microwave every time the oven beeped, indicating the cooking cycle was finished. It didn't take long for the bird, wanting more attention for itself, to start using the microwave beep as a contact call -- intended to bring the owner over to the bird, just like he went to the microwave. My suggestion was first that he considers whether or not he was actually giving his parrot enough attention. And second that he disconnects the microwave's beeper.

However, it doesn't stop with phones and microwaves. Here is a grey who thinks the house alarm pad is his owner's 'leaving the flock, but be right back' contact call.

"My greys are the ones who make contact calls, usually. When I am getting ready to leave the house, my Congo will start beeping like the beeps the alarm pad makes when I set it."

Even watching a pet dog come when called is often enough to make your parrot treat you like the dog to get a little more attention out of you.

One survey reply reads, "Rosie, my grey whistles for me like I'm a dog."

From Pam Clark, " Socrates (Blue-crown pionus) calls me in the morning when he wants to come out to the living room. He usually says...'here, kitty, kitty, kitty'."

Often, what we may think of as mindless screaming or insecurity is no more than the parrot being a parrot. They live in flocks, where there is safety in numbers. A parrot alone may soon find itself someone's lunch, so parrots want to know where their safety are at all times. They want to be reassured that everything is all right, so they use a contact call. Parrots need attention, because they are very social animals. They are also very intelligent animals and quickly perceive that we run to the telephone when it contact calls. So, they become the telephone contact call, hoping we will run to them. I firmly believe that there is a reason for most of the sounds our parrots imitate. If I cough, Jing does her loud sneeze imitation -- because sneezes and cough often go together and this is her way to let me know that we are part of the same flock.