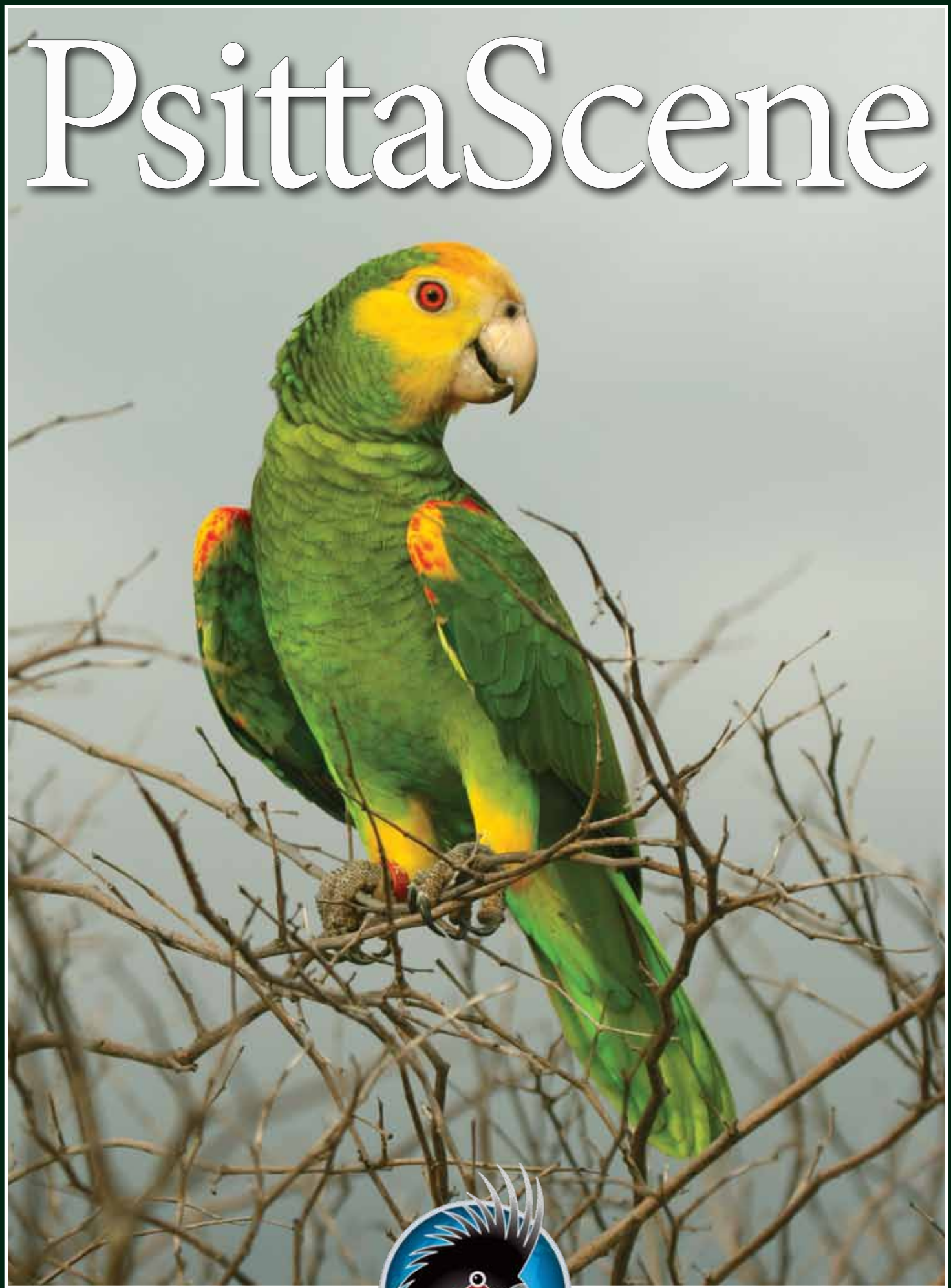
Magazine of the World Parrot Trust

PsittaScene



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Parrot Hero

Susan Friedman >>

Susan Friedman Ph.D., is a psychology professor at Utah State University. She is one of the few college professors with this professional background in human behavoir combined with a deep interest in the behavior and training of birds and other animals. Susan has helped pioneer efforts to apply to animals the scientifically sound teaching technology and ethical standard of Applied Behavior Analysis.

Susan teaches two on-line courses, one for veterinarians and other animal professionals, and another for pet owners; and she presents cross-species seminars around the world. Her articles appear on the Internet in 10 languages.

We applaud Susan's undying passion for the health and dignity of all animals and her tremendous support of the World Parrot Trust.

Tell us about your work with children and how that prepared you for working with companion animals and their caregivers. Early in my career I worked with two populations of children with special learning needs that were extreme enough to warrant living at our residential treatment center. One group was adolescents referred to as emotionally disturbed and behavior disordered, and the other group was children with autism. It was there that I first learned about the school of psychology that views the study of behavior change as a natural science. This science is called behavior analysis, from which emerged the teaching technology called applied behavior analysis.

Working with children, the standard of humane and effective treatment is of course very high. I hoped to bring this standard to our work with parrots and other captive animals. This standard is embodied by the "least intrusive" guideline. That is, given a choice between different, effective behavior change interventions, we are ethically bound to use the intervention that is most positive and provides the learner with the greatest degree of empowerment. By empowerment I mean the freedom to control one's own outcomes.

For example, many birds comply with their caregiver prying the bird's toes off the perch to get them to step up. However, the bird that has been taught with positive reinforcement to autonomously step onto an offered hand has a more positive experience and a higher degree of empowerment. An empowered animal, with a lifestyle of positive experiences, has a better quality of life. Detractors sometimes argue that empowered parrots means birdy bedlam; but this is not an either/or situation. With knowledge and skill about how behavior works, we can have empowered *and* well-behaved companion parrots. Force and coercion cannot produce such wonderful results.

While studying and seeking solutions to behavioral challenges in both humans and parrots, what parallels do you see? This is one of the truly exciting things about Earth: All the planet's animals learn according to the same basic principles. Although what we do and our motivation for doing it can be very different across species and individuals, there is no doubt that we all behave for a reason. That is, behavior is an evolved tool to operate on the environment for meaningful outcomes.

"I think of behavior like a stone tossed into calm waters.

All animals experience the consequences of behaving. People often think of consequences too narrowly. Consequences are essential feedback about the benefits and costs of behaving in that way, under those conditions. In short, behavior that works is repeated; behavior that doesn't work is suppressed or revised. This performance-feedback-revision loop is the source of animals' flexibility, which is needed to meet the demands of an ever-changing environment. With this contemporary understanding, it is no longer sensible to engage in the nature vs. nurture debate. Learning, defined as behavior change due to experience, *is* our nature.

What are some of the recurring issues you encounter while working with parrot caregivers? At the general level, there is so much misinformation about how behavior works that I have borrowed the term "cultural fog" to describe the obstacles to the scientific analysis of behavior that many people face. One of the main obstacles is a prevailing belief that animals behave largely from an innate, involuntary repertoire rather than their learning history. In fact, for parrots as for people, learning accounts for the largest part of their behavioral repertoires in the wild and in captivity. This is good news because learned problem behaviors can be replaced with positive behaviors, if one knows how to teach new behaviors well.

Another general problem is the over-reliance on labels to describe behavior. People are unaware that the names they call their birds are vague and uninformative from a teaching point of view. For example, we can call a bird "dominant" but that doesn't tell us the three most important things we need to know to change behavior: 1) what the bird is actually doing in observable terms; 2) the antecedent conditions that signal to the bird do x now; and, the consequence that gives the behavior function, the purpose served, by behaving in that way. The dominance label doesn't tell us whether the bird is lunging, biting, flying off, chasing, or grabbing the perch tightly with its feet. It doesn't tell us the conditions in which the behavior arises, e.g., on the cage top, or at night, when a hand is offered, or with a particular person or bird. And, the dominance label doesn't tell us the consequence the behavior produces that gives the behavior value for the bird, e.g., withdrawal of a hand, or access to food or a favorite perch. This behavior unit – antecedent, behavior, consequence – the ABCs, is the minimum information we need in order to teach the bird to behave differently, more successfully, living among people.

At the specific level, people commonly report that their birds refuse to come out of their cages, bite offered hands, and scream loudly for long durations. With a careful ABC assessment, we can retire vague labels (e.g., hormonal, abused, phobic) and set well operationalized behavior targets to teach parrots positive,

Throughout her career, Susan has worked with an amazing variety of species and people - from macaws to potbelly pigs; pet owners to professional trainers.

Behavior & Training Resources

Susan's website | www.behaviorworks.org
>> also includes information about on-line and in-person courses / events.

Steve Martin | www.naturalencounters.com

Barbara Heidenreich | www.goodbirdinc.com

WPT Experts | www.parrots.org

Cambridge Center | www.behavior.org

>> All sites linked from www.psittascene.org

alternative behaviors. Behavior change programs can be simple but they're not always easy; they require the careful application of learning principles and consistent implementation. Still, with a sound teaching plan, change will occur. To change behavior, change conditions, including what you do.

For example, when teaching a bird to step on your hand, first offer your hand about 6 inches away from the bird. Allow the bird to show you with its body language that it is ready to step up, then steadily move your hand toward your bird in the step-up position. When the bird steps up, be sure to reinforce that behavior immediately with a food treat or other consequence the bird values. Finally, allow the bird to step right back down. The freedom to choose to step down also reinforces the previous choice to step up. Resist the temptation to dash off with the bird to the living room until the bird performs this step without hesitation. Then move to the next step, walking with the bird perched on your hand.

Have your experiences working with parrots provided any insights and solutions helpful in raising your own daughers? It was my work with special needs children and adolescents that best prepared me for both motherhood and working with parrots. One of my early mentors, Ogden Lindsley, taught me that if you want to really understand a particular behavior then study the extremes. The learning needs of those children were extreme. By comparison, except for a few noteworthy instances, both my children's and parrots' behavior were less complicated to guide, for which I was continually amazed and grateful.

Having the privilege to help teach individuals from many species, the widespread applicability of best teaching practices always rings clear. Where some people see punishment opportunities (i.e., stopping behavior), a skilled teacher sees teaching opportunities and arranges the environment to make the right behavior easier and more rewarding for the learner. People often expect too much too soon from children and parrots. Behaviors are best taught by shaping, i.e., small reinforced steps, called approximations, towards the desired goal. In this way, the opportunity for positive practice and the rate of reinforcement is high – two necessary conditions for learning success and emotional wellbeing.

Great teaching is a dynamic process, not a dogmatic process. It is a dialogue in which essential information is exchanged with the learner. Rather than teaching things to animals, the sensitive caregiver teaches things with animals. No matter how much experience a caregiver brings to a training session, the learner always adds critical information to complete the process. This is the art of teaching – the knowledgeable application of learning principles and the sensitivity to lead the learner while being led yourself.

What guidance can you offer caregivers of older birds or birds that have been through many homes, to help them get off on the right foot? I think of behavior like a stone tossed into calm waters. When behavior is tossed into the environment, concentric circles result. The first circle closest to the behavior's entry point represents the current conditions. It is current conditions that are the strongest and longest lasting influencers of future behavior.

This is great news for caregivers of "seasoned" birds because we can't change an animal's history but we can change the current conditions right now. It all starts with answering the single most important question any caregiver can ask: What behavior do I want this bird to do? Clearly describe

Susan's passion is unmistakable; her goal: to provide the essential tools people need to empower and enrich the lives of the animals in their care.

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the desired behavior in observable terms and make your positive reinforcement, shaping plan. Waste no time on what you want the animal not to do. The problem behavior will naturally decrease when the bird has a well-reinforced alternative behavior in its repertoire. Behavior follows where positive reinforcement leads.

We encourage all our readers to take your courses! Meanwhile what resources might serve as an initial step in that direction? Recently, Steve Martin and I were discussing a shared insight: It's very important that people ask self-proclaimed experts where they learned about learning and behavior. We can all buy a guitar but we don't all make beautiful music. Sometimes people think that training is all too easy and they launch off to change an animal's behavior with little more than a dinner conversation. So, I am glad to encourage parrot caregivers to dedicate themselves to the study of learning and to arrange hands-on experiences where they can improve their training skills. I can promise that in doing so your relationships with your own species will improve too!

It would be a great honor if people found the information on my website helpful to their work with all the learner's with whom they interact. Everything on the website is available for free download and distribution. There are some great graphics for T-shirts and fun videos I call Pocketsize Behavior Science to share with other caregivers.

Steve Martin has a gift for translating scientific information into practical application and decades of experience training animals humanely; he has excellent articles on his website And, Barbara Heidenreich's contribution to companion parrot caregivers has been substantial. Sid Price, Chris Shanks, Cassie Malina, Chris Jenkins, and many of the contributors to the WPT's Expert Corner are on my list of resources, as well.

There are also superb resources in the larger world of learning and behavior worth mentioning. For example, Susan Schneider, a renowned behavior analyst, has written a fabulous new book called *The Science of Consequences* that I know your readers would find enlightening; Paul Chance's *Learning and Behavior* text is an eye opener. Murray Sidman's groundbreaking book, *Coercion and It's Fallout*, is a life-changing read, and the Cambridge Center website is worth perusing to get an idea for the far reaching relevance of our science of behavior change.

A lot has changed in aviculture and parrot-keeping in the last 15-20 years. Do you think caregivers are increasingly well-informed, or is there still a long way to go? Of course our work to improve the quality of life for all learners is never done. However, it is inspiring to see people's awareness of humane, effective training practices growing steadily. The current trends in animal behavior research and practice represent a new awakening. We see now the learning potential of the animals, as never before.

At the same time, I try to stay mindful of the need to extend compassion for one another. It's a lot to ask people to take the leap out of the cultural fog, away from practices they believe to be effective, toward new ways of understanding, predicting and changing their world. I can't imagine a more amazing planet than this one, where animal life is at once so different and yet so similar. It is the similarities that intrigue me most, and learning principles are one great unifying feature across species.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts.

Thank you Susan for your work and your passion for all learners.