

Wow. That Bird Sure Can Scream!

By Barbara Heidenreich

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“Screaming. Somebody reinforced the heck out of that behavior.” I said to myself. Misty, a double yellow headed Amazon parrot, lived with me for only a few weeks. She was there so that I could put some of her vocal behaviors on cue. However it quickly became apparent she had a few other behaviors that needed to be addressed first. Before her stay with me she resided with Jill Bell for six years. Prior to that time her history is pretty fuzzy. She is estimated to be 19 years old. This meant screaming could have been reinforced for at least 13 years. It must have been, because it was STRONG. Misty was relentless. I’d leave the room; she’d scream and scream and scream.

She had been a good reminder of what companion parrot owners experience when faced with a very annoying and challenging problem. It can be very frustrating. Oddly enough, when I walk into someone else’s home and hear screaming birds I am usually not effected. But when a bird is screaming specifically, in what feels like a demanding way, to get my attention, it strikes a nerve. How does one find the patience to be a good trainer in those situations? It is not easy, but definitely necessary.

My mantra with Misty was “I am solving the problem. Getting angry or letting that knot in my gut sway my strategy will not give me the desired results. I am confident what I am doing will work. It has worked before with other birds I have trained. Hang in there!”

And it is true, my blue fronted Amazon parrot Tarah also learned to scream for attention. Completely through my own ignorance I reinforced screaming. I acquired Tarah, as many people do, when he was offered to me for free. At the time I was working in a veterinary hospital. One of my co-workers also worked part time in a pet store. Someone had walked in off of the street and sold her the bird for \$100. Was the bird stolen, smuggled or desperately unwanted? I don’t know. My co-worker found she was overwhelmed with too many animals in her home and asked if I would be interested in watching the bird for awhile. (That “while” has turned in 18 years.)

Once in my apartment I was thrilled when Tarah offered a “hello” at the sight of me snacking on a piece of bread. However the enchantment wore off as Tarah began to scream anytime I was out of sight. Unaware of how to stop this undesired behavior, I did as many do, I ran back into the room each time Tarah screamed and told him to “Be quiet.” Did it work to stop the screaming? No, and at the same time I found I very much disliked my attempts at punishing reactions to the undesired behavior. I so enjoy having animals respond positively to my presence and did not want to become an unpleasant experience in my bird’s life in order to stop the screaming behavior.

While in the middle of dealing with this problem, I was introduced to the book “Don’t Shoot the Dog” by Karen Pryor. (Also known as the bible of animal trainers) As I read the book, I latched onto two important principles that could help me address the screaming problem. Extinction and differential reinforcement. Extinction is described as the process of discontinuing reinforcing a behavior that has been previously reinforced. In other words part of my strategy should include discontinuing offering reinforcers for screaming. This meant I should no longer run back into the room, or yell at Tarah. The book did not describe the exact situation I was experiencing with my bird. Rather it described the principles and how to apply them to a variety of examples, human and animal. In reading the words, I made the connection that the concepts could apply to any behavior I no longer wanted to continue. Paired with the principle of extinction was the strategy of differential reinforcement of an alternate behavior. In other words, if screaming would no longer work to get a response from me, what would? For Tarah this turned out to be a whistle. In the middle of a session of screaming and me doing my best to ignore this undesired behavior, Tarah offered a “whistle”. I immediately reinforced this by responding with the word “good”. Tarah replied with a scream. This was because at this point he only had one repetition of whistling being positively reinforced and an entire year of screaming being reinforced. However I remained consistent with my strategies and within two weeks time Tarah learned to whistle instead of scream when he wanted a response from me. 17 years later Tarah whistles when he wants to know where I am, when he desires a toy or treat, when I come home, and when he simply seems to be “happy”. The undesired screaming behavior was extinguished and replaced with a whistling sound.

Misty seemed to throw a kink in our now peaceful, well behaved and relatively quiet household. I “knew” from my past experience that I could repeat the process I had implemented with Tarah. However this time proved to be a bit more challenging. Because I was working out of the home at the time, it meant no breaks from dealing with the behavior problem. Every time I left the room I was challenged with having to be focused on training this bird. I was finding this to be very demanding. In addition there were times in the day when mentally I was just not prepared to train. Rather than feeling inspired to train and ready to resolve the behavior problem, I found myself dreading having to leave a room and work with Misty. I decided I needed to better set myself up for success. In getting to know Misty, who other than the screaming behavior, I found to be a delight, I learned that in the past she was accustomed to being covered at night. I took advantage of this and decided to leave Misty covered during the time in the morning I needed to shower and prepare breakfast and bird diets in the kitchen. This allowed me time to peacefully attend to necessary tasks in the morning. After this, I found I was less stressed and more prepared to begin a training session with Misty.

Throughout the day I would treat each time I left the room for whatever reason as a learning opportunity for Misty. I practiced my strategy of extinguishing screaming by not responding to it, followed by reinforcing a desired behavior. In Misty’s case the desired behavior was not a specific sound. Instead I chose to reinforce silence. My plan was to

reinforce small increments of time of silence and gradually increase the duration Misty was silent before I would reinforce her with my presence or attention. If I was in the kitchen I would wait just outside of her view while she screamed. At first if she offered a pause in screaming that seemed the slightest second longer than what she had presented in between screams in the past, I would quickly appear and offer generous amounts of attention. I wanted quiet to receive a greater amount of positive reinforcement than screaming if I could. Overtime I gradually increased the amount of time she remained quiet before I would respond. And it worked!

However this was not without challenges. There were times throughout the day when a training session was not convenient for me when I needed to leave the room. Rather than cover Misty I opted for engaging her in other acceptable activity. For example, I often offered Misty a small cardboard box, a rolled up ball of newspaper, a new toy, or a portion of her diet just prior to leaving the room. This gave Misty another activity to focus on instead of screaming. But it also was not an opportunity for Misty to learn that screaming would not gain my attention and quiet would. It was still important to include training sessions throughout the day. The other activity was meant only to offer a break from training for me. This may have also lengthened the amount of time it took overall to teach Misty that screaming no longer would work.

Another challenge in training Misty was that Tarah was in the same room as Misty. Tarah would whistle at times when I left the room. While I wanted to respond to his whistle, I did not want to also then accidentally reinforce Misty's screaming. My strategy had to be to only reinforce Tarah's whistle if Misty was not screaming. If I was focused on the training session, I also found I could position myself so that Tarah could see me, but Misty could not. This allowed me to reinforce Tarah's "good" behavior and wait for Misty to offer silence before responding to her.

Misty's screaming also appeared to stimulate an occasional screaming behavior in Tarah as well. Fortunately because he had a strong reinforcement history for a whistle, I simply waited for him to offer a whistle before I would respond. Tarah quickly returned to offering a whistle and once again extinguished screaming.

Misty also would on occasion scream for my attention while I was in the room. When this occurred, I simply left the room. Again my thought process was to teach her that screaming now created the opposite response. Instead of people coming to her, people go away. It was also important to reinforce her with attention at times for being quiet while I was in the room as well.

Overall training Misty to present silence to gain my attention took about 6 weeks to train. Obviously this was longer than it took to change Tarah's behavior. This could have been a result of the strength of the behavior in each bird based on their individual positive reinforcement histories. It could have also been a result of the fewer training sessions

applied to Misty during the given amount of time. It could also be a factor of the birds as individual learners. In any case the end result was a bird that successfully learned to present desired behavior for attention as opposed to the undesired behavior of screaming.

I went through the emotional gamut that many companion parrot owners face when addressing screaming problems. However by focusing on good training strategy and allowing myself opportunities to relieve myself of the stress associated with addressing the problem I was able to attain my desired training goal. Screaming for attention is a behavior problem with a solution. Set yourself up for success and invest the time to train the desired behavior. The end result can be a lifetime of good behavior.

Tips to address screaming for attention

Extinguish screaming.

Reinforce any other behavior besides screaming.

Remember the extinction burst is a good sign! The end might be insight. Change your feeling from frustrated to hopeful when your bird really goes for it.

If you need to leave the room, but can't focus on training, offer another positively reinforcing activity prior to leaving the room. This may buy you a short window of time to move freely between rooms without screaming behavior. However you will still need to include training sessions at some point.

Get some earplugs to help you cope with the screaming during the extinction burst.

Plan to wait in the other room. Prepare in advance a quiet activity you can do when trying to deal with a screaming session.

Leave the room immediately when your bird screams for your attention.

Manage your activities to help set yourself up for success. For example keep the lights off or your bird covered for a few extra minutes in the morning until you are prepared to deal with the screaming with good training strategies.

Get support. If neighbors are having a problem with your screaming parrot, explain to your neighbors that you are working on training your bird not to scream.

Count seconds in intervals of silence and increase if possible.

Focus on fixing the problem instead of your frustration.

Believe you will get there. This strategy does work.

Keep notes if necessary to determine how and when this behavior maybe getting reinforced. Eliminate any reinforcers for screaming.

Offer even more reinforcers for the desired behavior than the undesired behavior would normally receive in the past.

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She is the author of “Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavior Problems in Companion Parrots” by Avian Publications and also “The Parrot Problem Solver. Finding Solutions to Aggressive Behavior” by TFH Publications. She is also the producer of the Good Bird Parrot Behavior and Training DVD series.

Barbara’s experience also includes consulting on animal training in zoos and other animal related facilities. She has been a part of the development and production of more than 15 different free flight education programs. Barbara continues to provide consulting services to zoos, nature centers and other animal facilities through her other company Animal Training and Consulting Services. In her career she has trained animals, trained staff, and/or presented shows at facilities around the world.