

Do Parrots Really Need to Step Up on to Hands?

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How many times have we heard or read the following advice: “Every parrot needs to know how to step up”; or “Stepping up is one of the fundamental skills you need to teach your parrot”; or even “To be a good companion, your parrot needs to step up on to your hand consistently.” Just browsing through some of the current parrot care books and magazines reveals a plethora of such statements.

I confess these words were tattooed on my brain for the entire five years I had my first two parrots. Indeed the very first thing I did when I got my baby parrot was to teach her to “step up”, using what I now realize was negative reinforcement (pressing my finger on her belly). We were practicing the step up behavior like mad, even the laddering, every day. She became fluent. To this day, I am amazed she did learn despite the aversive strategy used and that she does not hold it against me.

I was convinced I was not going to have a satisfactory relationship with my parrots if I did not teach them to “step up” fluently. Until I met Pepe.

Pepe is my seven year old green-cheek conure. He came to us after being locked up for five years in his cage “to be looked at”, as we were told by the previous owners. The first time I picked up Pepe he went straight for my finger, lacerating the skin badly. Not knowing any better I did what I had been told. I took the bite and made him “step up” several times from finger to finger. His biting worsened.

Enter positive reinforcement. Immediately after learning about positive reinforcement I started a program of regular training sessions with Pepe. The target behavior I chose to focus on was stepping up on to my hands. We did progress to the point that he would step up without hesitation for me in exchange for his seed. I wrote about this experience in Volume 1 Issue 3 Fall 2005 of Good Bird Magazine. Things were going well, until a few months later when, due to certain circumstances at work, I became unfocused and immersed in my thoughts. I took his step up behavior for granted, and I started making mistakes. I allowed him to bite me a few times, those painful, skin-breaking, blood-spluttering bites that only the beak of a spitfire 60 gram conure can deliver, as I became a bit more demanding of my need for him to present the behavior at certain times.

I decided to take a break from “step up” training and focus instead on other hands-off behaviors, with the promise to come back to the step up behavior later. Meanwhile, thanks to previous stick training with positive reinforcement, I continued to move Pepe around with a hand-held perch I had previously introduced to him. I also used targeting to ask him to move to different places when needed. He learned several fun tricks. But in

the back of my mind a thought still lingered: *“Forget the wave, I really should be teaching him to step up instead. He really needs to know how to do it.”*

But still I could not bring myself to resume finger contact with Pepe. The memory of the painful bites was still very much alive, as were the scars on my hand. Worse, I had lost my confidence. When I approached him with my hand, it was shaky and hesitant. As a result Pepe was still lunging every time I ventured my hand closer. My sense of guilt was mounting. *“He really should learn to step up”* I thought to myself.

One day, in the middle of a teaching session and after a few bloody bites, I had a sudden revelation. So what if Pepe does not step up on my hand? We have a great relationship already. We have fun together during our training sessions, he makes me laugh, and amazes me every day with his cleverness and problem-solving ability. I can move him around on a stick or through targeting if I need to. And more importantly, his quality of life is already great, and had improved dramatically ever since we started the formalized training sessions. What could stepping up on the hand possibly add for him or me? The more I looked at it, the more it seemed clear that it was irrelevant.

The guilt dissipated. He does *not* have to step up on to my hands, not if he does not want to! I do *not* have to expose my bare skin to that mallet beak!

Without this pressure I became more receptive to all the other things Pepe was giving me. I started seeing his unlimited learning potential. And this bird can learn anything. In the last few months Pepe has learned to climb a rope, both up and down (I call it the “Indiana Jones” behavior), retrieve his toys and put them back in a bowl, put coins in a bank, mail letters (using a toy letterbox), pull a little toy truck to a bowl and unload it, ride on a toy car, play basketball, and more. If it sounds like I am boasting, it’s because I am!

I believe that there is too much emphasis in the average companion parrot literature on stepping up on to hands being a fundamental skill for companion parrots. This emphasis is unjustified, and even detrimental. It puts a burden on the parrot, whose failure to comply is regarded as evidence of poor companion potential; and on the caregiver, who gets bitten and feels unnecessarily guilty. To me, it is clear now that the concept of having to step up on to hands is a relic of the old dominance idea, where infallibly complying with the “step up” command was regarded as the first sign of the human having “control” of the parrot. In addition, our mammalian need to touch and be touched has certainly contributed to strengthen the misconception that companion parrots by definition have to allow their human caregiver to handle them....literally.

I am not advocating we give up entirely on teaching our parrots to step up on to hands and to be touched. But if after giving it a good, honest try the animal makes it clear she is not too keen on the touchy-feely thing, why insist? Why even consider it a “behavior problem”? My experience with Pepe has shown to me that a hands off relationship can be as gratifying as a hands on one, and undoubtedly in my situation, more fun.

During a workshop I heard Barbara Heidenreich of Good Bird Inc ask the audience
“What would you teach your parrot to do if stepping up on the hand was not an option?”

My Answer: Everything else. Happy teaching!