

## **SIMPLER STEPS TO STEP UP**

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Sometimes I hear caregivers state that their parrot “ought to know how to step up” because this is the simplest, most basic behavior for a companion parrot to know. This puzzles me, since I consider stepping up on the hand or on the stick a very advanced behavior for a companion parrot to know. Let’s see, step up involves: proximity to a human, “accepting” a close hand or stick which may be unfamiliar items to the parrot, touching and being touched; locomotor skills such as lifting, moving and resting a foot, shifting the weight on it, and more... if you think about it, stepping up is a big behavior to ask an animal, especially one who may not have a history of interaction with humans, or had a poor one, or simply did not have time to develop a relationship with her caregiver yet.

My point is that step up should be the last in a series of simpler behaviors we teach a parrot first to develop a relationship with him, where “simpler” for me includes “no contact” and even “without coming outside the cage”. Moreover, teaching simpler behaviors first gives us a chance to get to know the unique individual in front of us and thus develop the most effective strategy for teaching a behavior as complex as step up to that particular individual. To illustrate this, let me describe my recent experience with a pair of Vasa parrots I am fostering long-term for The Gabriel Foundation.

Inti and Chaska<sup>1</sup> are a 12-year old ex-breeding pair of Greater Vasa (*Coracopsis Vasa*) parrots who, allegedly, were infertile and kept as companions by their former caregiver. They were not handled much and when they were released to the Foundation they were not accustomed to humans – leaned away from proffered hand and run to the back of the cage. At the end of their stay at TGF, thanks to the socialization work done by the wonderful staff, they were already accepting treats from hands from inside the cage.

We picked up Inti and Chaska at the Baltimore airport on May 25<sup>th</sup>. After allowing them a few days to settle in I started working with them. It did not take me long to discover that their favorite food is sunflower seed, indeed, any seed! Sunflower seed was promptly removed from their diet of fresh vegetables and grains and kept aside for the formal training sessions.

At that time they were both moving away to the back of the cage when I was approaching. I attributed this regress to the stress of the travel and the change of environment from the Foundation to my house. Thus, my first goal with them was to shape proximity to me. I started by dropping a sunflower seed in the food bowl (located in the front of the cage) every time I was coming by the cage. At first, I would drop the

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<sup>1</sup> Quechua words for “Sun” and “Star”, respectively.

seed and move back to the opposite side of the room, to allow them to come close to the bowl, thus negatively reinforcing their movement toward me. Little by little, I shortened the distance I was moving backward until eventually I was able to stand by the cage while they were retrieving the seed and eating it in my presence. Soon they were taking the seed from my fingers through the cage bars.

As a side note, I want to remark that, luckily for me, lack of human interaction for these two meant that they never learnt to bite. And I was going to do all in my power not to teach them that.

Having shaped proximity to me, they were ready for their next behavior – targeting. I cannot emphasize enough how fundamental this behavior is. Targeting (i.e., touching an item with a part of the body) is a no-contact behavior, simple to teach and learn, extremely versatile, a great way for the learner to understand the if-then contingency – IF I do this, THEN the reinforcer follows – and for the teacher to add value to herself through association with the reinforcer. I taught targeting to all my parrots before I taught them anything else. It is also a great way to exercise a cage-bound parrot, or to interact with him if you only have 3 minutes before going to work and cannot take him out of the cage. Just move that target around and watch those legs get moving!

As a target I use chopsticks, which I collect from my Chinese dinner takeouts. I hold the chopstick at some distance from the parrot (where his body language tells me he is comfortable) and I wait for the parrot to come and explore it with the beak. The second she touches the tip of the stick I praise and reinforce. (Intermediate steps may be required with some parrots to reinforce approximations to being close to the chopstick, of course.) Luckily for me, Inti and Chaska took to the stick immediately, coming close and touching it without hesitation. Voila – a few repetitions and targeting was learned!

Targeting came handy on one occasion when Inti escaped. I was cleaning his cage and out he went, flying around the room and landing on top. By moving the target I gradually led him closer and closer to the cage door and then inside.

The next behavior I wanted to shape was to hold the foot against the cage bar and allow a nail trim, as their toenails were quite long by now. This is another behavior that can be taught without requiring the bird to be out of the cage and is relatively no-contact. The way I shaped it was by holding my fist with the seed in view high up so they had to stretch up to get the seed. Instinctively the foot closest to the bars comes up and grabs them; praise and reinforce. After a few repetitions of this, I started working on duration of keeping the foot on the cage bars, then bringing the clipper closer and closer, then touching the nail with clipper, until I could snip away the tip of the nail.

At this point there was no hesitation in the way they approached me from inside the cage, and I would often find them waiting for me on their training spot when I entered the room. Had they shown still some hesitation I would have continued with other no-contact, in-the-cage behaviors. Instead, I decided they were ready to try to step up. And

here is when my knowledge of them as individuals, acquired during the previous training, paid off.

For Inti, who still shied away from direct touch, I opted for using a hand-held perch. The approximations of my shaping were touching the perch with one foot first, then placing the foot on it, then shifting his weight on the foot on the perch, then standing on it with both feet, then standing on it while I was slowly moving the perch. I had to make sure my hand holding the perch was rock solid in order to make the experience the most positive possible for him. On July 20<sup>th</sup> Inti came out of his cage on the hand-held perch. Three days later he stepped on his gym at the other end of the room. One week later he stepped on the scale and I was able to measure his weight for the first time ever – a whopping 507 grams (it did not help he had eaten half a jar of seeds!).

Things for Chaska went differently. She had started growing back feathers on her head. Female Vasa parrots lose their head feathers in breeding season and their head skin turns mustard yellow, which makes them look like turkey vultures! As we were approaching the end of the breeding season, little shiny pinfeathers started popping out on her head. However, Chaska is temporarily separated from Inti by a removable divider, as female Vasa are well known to attack and even kill the male during breeding season. Perhaps because of the prickling pin feathers and lack of a preening buddy Chaska started bowing her head and soliciting rubbing from us through the cage bars. This led me to believe that she could be taught to step up directly onto my hand.

I prepared her for standing on my hand in the following way. I capitalized on her previously acquired behavior of holding the foot against the cage bars for a nail trim. So I cued her for this behavior, except that at the last moment I put my index finger between her foot and the bar, so that she ended up wrapping my finger around the bar; I marked and reinforced. After a few repetitions, I started moving my finger gradually down through the bar space, until I was holding it horizontal on the perch. So basically I was teaching her to target my finger with her foot. Then I added two fingers – luckily the cage is a big one and the space between the bars is relatively large – then three fingers through two consecutive bar spaces. When I finally opened the door and offered my hand palm-up Chaska knew exactly what to do – she put her foot on it with no hesitation.

The next approximation was to have her shift her weight on the foot on my hand. I accomplished that simply by luring her forward. Eventually she put also the second foot on my hand. I kept my hand steady and at rest – no movement! When I first lifted my hand by an inch I immediately gave her the chance to go back to the perch, which she took right away. Teaching her to stay on the moving hand proved to be more challenging than I thought, but I soon realized that she was more eager to accept vertical motion than horizontal one, so I started moving her up and down first, then slowly shifting to a more horizontal motion, until she was ready to come out.

On August 1<sup>st</sup>, two months after coming to my house, Chaska had her first outing from the cage on my hand. She sat there with her weight low, feathers loose, her big brown eyes wandering around the room, while I walked her to the gym and back. It was one

triumphant moment for me and, I hope, for her as well. I thought about this beautiful creature, who had not allowed human touch thus far, and who was now standing on my hand; and I was deeply moved.

Such is the power of positive reinforcement.

*Rita's passion for parrots exploded several years ago when she acquired her first parrot, a Jardine's named Reggie. Since then, Rita has been an avid learner of all things avian. She lives in Northern Virginia with seven parrots, two horses, and a very supporting husband. An astrophysicist by trade, Rita is a firm believer in the power of evidence-based knowledge to improve the lives of parrots, and all animals, both in the wild and in captivity. To this end, she co-founded the Animal Education Foundation, a non-profit organization focused on parrot behavior, training, and enrichment solutions ([www.animaleducationfoundation.org](http://www.animaleducationfoundation.org)), operating in the Washington, DC, metro area.*