



Winning a Bird's Trust
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Photos of Jubilee and Princess by Katie Slider

"[People who do animal rescue] are a reminder that animal welfare is not just a moral problem to be solved in statutes, but a moral opportunity to fill our lives with acts of compassion....

How we treat our fellow creatures is one more way in which each of us, every day, writes our own epitaph – "

Matthew Scully (Dominion)



You have been reading about the birds on the Mickaboo.org website, and a particular story touches you. You have a kind heart. You want to help. You meet the bird and you see a possibility of connection. But maybe this particular bird has had a tough time. Maybe this bird has good reason to be cautious about people. You know that Mickaboo folks have been working with this bird, but you wonder – **Can I get this bird to trust me?** (Yes, you can.) **And if so, HOW?**

What draws us to birds, and especially to parrots? Their beauty, their intelligence, their capacity for love and humor and play, the fact that they are still wild in their hearts. We bring these intelligent, funny, loud, intensely social athletes into our homes, and expect them to settle down and be good pets. Sometimes the bird lives its life as a cherished and well-cared-for member of the family. But when human caretakers either cannot or will not provide the stable enriched life that the parrot needs, it can be neglected, stuck in a barren room or closet, abused, or bounced from home to home, resulting in significant emotional damage. Sometimes the beloved human companion becomes incapacitated or dies, and there is no one who wants the bird. If the bird is lucky, and we are lucky, it comes to a rescue like Mickaboo, where foster parents and adopters can work to heal the bird's broken heart.

From budgies to macaws, parrots are smart, they are not push overs - we have to earn their respect and their trust. And when we do, it is well worth the time and effort. Bonding deeply with a parrot (large or small) is a glorious experience.

This is not a journey for the faint of heart, or those who want their pets nice and neat out of the box. But it can be remarkable and profound, rewarding in ways no words can describe. In the twelve years since I started working with Dr. Chris Sanders at Wildwood Veterinary Hospital, and then started volunteering with Mickaboo, I have had the privilege of working with some very angry, fearful, traumatized birds - sharing the moments as they start to trust, start to believe there is hope and kindness and stability, and their hearts open to love. Always they give me far more than I can give them.

I want to share some of what I have learned. I am no expert. I have felt my way along by Braille. Many of you are far more knowledgeable, have ideas I have not even considered. Some folks have great success with clicker training, but I don't use that method and so cannot comment on it. I do not pretend I could work with all birds. But I have had some wonderful success with these birds. In this article I share my experiences with just three of them, to illustrate some of the guiding principles which have seemed to work.

A. Context and Perspective

A human home is a completely different environment from that for which parrots evolved for millennia. Fortunately, because they are intelligent and social, they are adaptable, and it appears that they can be happy with us if we work with them to give them the respect, stimulation, love, stability, and mental and physical exercise they need. They want to be part of a new flock. But clearly it does not always work out that way.

Remember that this rehoming business was not the bird's decision. In the wild they would live with their flock, and their mate, for their entire life. Now they have in essence been kidnapped from one living situation into another, with new people, new environment, new potential threats. Most birds will respond with caution.

For us good-hearted folk whose desire is to establish a loving and fun relationship with the bird, it can be hard to remember that in the natural world we look like predators. We may not be stalking into our bird rooms armed with guns or snares, but we have big staring eyes, big mouths with big teeth, and claw-like hands that can grasp a bird against its will. Any bird that is half awake will view an unfamiliar looming human presence with concern and attention at the very least - wouldn't you?

Give the bird a chance to settle down and feel comfortable. It is probably best to have the cage up against a far wall where he/she can observe without feeling confronted. Although it is hard to contain our excitement about the new arrival, it is easy to overwhelm a bird by surrounding him/her with too much attention, too much intrusion. The opposite of feeling safe is feeling threatened, which is not a good way to build trust.

Rule Number One - always treat the bird with respect!

B. Start with where the bird IS, not where you want it to be. Be prepared – the bird may bite.

Be a close observer, look into its eyes, and assess the body language. Stand at a respectful distance and just watch (without staring like a predator). Is the bird interested but unsure? Is the bird hostile when approached? Is the bird terrified?

When **Mimi** (cockatiel) came to Wildwood Vet Hospital, she had had both feet and part of her pelvis amputated because in her previous home she flew and landed in a hot frying pan. She had not been a tame bird before, and now every time someone touched her it was to give medications or to change bandages, both of which she hated. She was angry, in constant pain, very depressed, lonely, and would hiss loudly and bite anyone who tried to touch her.



Mimi several months after her accident. Most of both feet have been amputated. The ankle joint has fused so she cannot bend her legs. She had to wear bandages the rest of her life.



Jubilee turning his head toward the sound of my voice

Jubilee (blue front amazon) came to me for fostering terrified, disoriented and angry. Jubilee is blind, which amplified his confusion. Oakland Animal Control had seized him out of a storage locker where he had been living with his homeless owner, eating crackers and donuts. Suddenly he was in a new environment which he could not see, full of sounds and activity which could represent a threat. Hands moving close to him resulted in a hard bite which would draw blood.

Princess (lilac crown amazon) has a shattered wing and two missing toes from old trauma. I think she has mild neurologic damage, because she falls if startled. She was terrified of hands or being touched, and would scream, lunge and nip if you moved toward her, then try hard to run away.



Princess watching warily – note the shattered frozen wing.

C. Let the bird know you are delighted and honored to have him/her in your home.

Parrots know when they are welcome. Like most of us, they are more inclined to warm up to people who genuinely like them and who treat them with respect. Initially this needs to be low key, eyes down, voice low, being careful not to overwhelm the bird and make it more fearful. As the bird becomes more comfortable you can become more exuberant. Do frequently tell the bird that you think s/he is beautiful, has lovely eyes, you love him/her, that s/he is safe now with you, that you are glad this bird is there and you are looking forward to an excellent relationship in the future. Let your voice be gentle and full of feeling.

D. Go slow. Set tiny goals. Be patient. Be very patient. This may take a long time.

Your bird is a prey animal, instinctively cautious about new situations and potential predators. This bird has no reason to trust you yet. If this bird is calm and friendly – great! You will be able to move more quickly.

If the bird is fearful or hostile (a sign of fear) don't push it. Speak softly. Avoid direct eye contact at first (after all, predators stare at prey when they hunt). Perhaps just sit near the bird and read out loud, so the bird gets used to your presence and your voice. Keep it slow and low and for short periods of time - be sure you have the cage located where the bird is not subject to human interaction all the time, or the bird may start to lunge, hiss and bite as a way of telling you "You are scaring me, intruding on me. Can't you see how stressed I am - BACK OFF!"

Mimi - I started by just talking to her a lot, letting her know I was glad to see her, that she was beautiful, that it was going to be OK. I just kept talking softly whenever I was near her in her hospital cage. I did not try to pet or cuddle her, because she was already being subjected to daily handling against her will for medical treatments, so it was important to let her know that every greeting was not going to be followed by something unpleasant. At first she ignored me, but after a couple of weeks she looked up when I came in the room, then she started chirping a little greeting, then she was really glad to see me - tiny steps forward.

Jubilee - I learned that one challenge in working with a blind bird is that you cannot read their emotions in their eyes, unlike most of our birds where you can watch for eyes pinning and flaring. (Eclectus and male cockatoos have very dark eyes which are also difficult to read). I had to be very careful to always let him know where I was whenever I was near him, because his blindness made him more fearful and prone to being startled. When I was approaching him or moving around him, I would explain where I was and what I was doing, and I would tap on, or slightly move, objects so he could hear me. Gradually he began to relax, as he came to trust that I would not come unannounced.

Princess – Her eyes told me she was lonely and wanted to be friends, but she responded with hostile panic to any overture. She would listen attentively when I talked to her, but she shook violently, screamed and lunged at my hands if I tried to touch her. So the first step was to just be around her, moving slowly and talking quietly, as she gradually allowed herself to get curious about me.

E. Initiate physical interaction in short 10-15 minute sessions with patience, lots of positive reinforcement, and a sense of humor. End on an upbeat.

If the bird is “food motivated”, and you can figure out what are the favorite treats, offer the treats only during training sessions. Break walnut halves into 4 or 5 pieces. Get thin sliced almonds. Cut apples into chunks that can be swallowed in one or two chews. Break pine nuts and sunflower seeds in half. For little birds, get fresh millet sprays and pull off very small “branches”. All pieces should be small so the bird stays hungry and interested, the treats are eaten quickly, and the bird does not fill up on high-fat food.

Have a code word that you consistently use when you want the bird to interact. My word is “EASY – GOOD BIRD!”

Training sessions for physical contact should be short (10-15 minutes), fun, and end on a positive note. I use lots of praise, and whenever there is any progress I say “THANK YOU!!!” It is the bird’s body, after all, and I regard any physical interaction as an honor.

Kiss their feet! Many birds will allow me to kiss their feet when they are hanging on the inside of the cage with their toes hanging over the cage bars. They feel safe allowing me to do it because they are still inside the cage, and I get to be silly and enthusiastic and say “THANK YOU!” a lot, and perhaps also offer a small treat through the bars of the cage. If the bird tries to rearrange your facial anatomy when you do this - then don’t do this.

Parrots love silliness - so laugh, sing, make jokes. Parrots can be very funny, and they love it when you notice and laugh. As in any relationship, a sense of humor goes a long way, and it really helps if you don’t take it personally when things do not go the way you want.

Mimi was not very food motivated - treats did not much interest her. But once she was interested in me, she started to respond to my touch, and I started to cuddle her very loosely for short periods of time. Because she had no feet, there was no way for her to perch – instead I had to balance and cup her in my hand. Gradually she allowed me to hold her more and more, to rub her head. She started to allow me to soothe and reassure her.

Around this time I fell in love with her, adopted her, and set her up in a “special needs” adapted cage.



Mimi in her cage at home. Note use of platforms instead of perches. All food/water dishes were placed in middle of cage so she could travel around the cage perimeter using the cage bars for balance.



It's OK to step onto this human's arm.

Jubilee was so-so about treats; he was much more concerned about predictability and stability. He resisted any effort to touch or pet him (I think because he could not see the hand coming) - it was easier for him to accept an "EASY - STEP UP" if he could be sure that any perch offered would be stable. I learned he usually did not want to step out of or off his cage onto my hand, but over time he would step up on a perch and from there onto my hand. He would also step up from my lap, or the sofa, onto my hand. It took a long time for us to develop a communication system, and he often bit me hard enough to draw blood while we were working it out. I would tell him "Easy - Step Up!" when I wanted him to step up. When he bit me I would briefly tell him "Oww, that hurt" in a hurt tone and back off - he would respond by calming down, and in fact would usually look apologetic. I would let

him chill out for a while to get his sense of safety back (while I went and found the bandages!). Again, lots of praise, lots of "THANK YOU!", and bits of nut as reinforcement for every act of trust. We also laughed a lot - he liked that.

Princess is very food-motivated, which helped a lot. I needed her to be at about waist/chest level for me to work with her, so I put her initial foster cage on the floor in front of me while I sat on the sofa.

She would climb out onto the top of the cage, where I could offer her treats while I was sitting down. First step was to just hold out the small treat and keep my hand still. She would pace back and forth, wary eye on me, clearly wanting the treat. Eventually she would move toward my hand, and as I said "EASY - GOOD BIRD" she would finally lean forward and quickly take it from me, which was followed by much praise and "THANK YOU!" for her courage. (NOTE: if the bird lunges toward the treat in an aggressive way, I simply withhold the treat and turn away without comment or any "drama reward". A few minutes later we try again. Eventually the bird learns that if s/he lunges aggressively to rip it from me there is no treat and no response. Taking the treat "nicely" results in getting the treat plus extravagant praise and thanks.)

When she took the treat from me consistently, the next step was to lay one arm on top of the cage and hold the treat over my arm with the other hand, so she had to come near the arm to get the treat (always using "EASY - GOOD BIRD" then praise and "THANK YOU!".



Princess leaning far over my arm and up to get her treat and praise, a very courageous move for her.

Next I moved the hand with the treat further and further back, a centimeter at a time, so she had to lean over my arm and even touch my prone arm with her chest while stretching to get the treat.



Cage on floor so the top of cage is about waist high for me sitting down next to cage.



Moving toward me with the scary arm in front of her.

I continued like that with Princess for at least a week, letting her get confident about reaching up over my arm to get her

treat and enthusiastic praise and thanks. The next breakthrough was to actually touch her. As I have done with many birds, I would hold the treat in one hand, and as she reached confidently toward it would say “EASY - GOOD BIRD” and reach to gently touch her beak with the other hand. During the first few days I tried this she would scream and run away. My response would be to quietly take away both hands (including the one with the precious treat), lean away from her to give her space, and say nothing for a few minutes. Then I would resume just talking quietly, reassuring her she was a “GOOD BIRD!” while she relaxed. After a few more minutes, I would try again. Initially she would not take the risk of letting me touch her beak, even for the precious treat - so after maybe four or five unsuccessful attempts I would go back to giving her the treat if she reached for it without asking her to let me touch her, followed by lots of enthusiastic praise - thus ending the session on an upbeat.

The first time Princess let me stroke her beak I did a little dance, and I cried, I was so happy! Soon she was letting me rub her head and give her skritchies.



Big breakthrough!



And up we go!

Once she was OK with me stroking her head, it was time to start stepping up. She was still fearful about this, so I would let her climb up on to her FunTimeBirdy™ playground, and then move the whole playground down to the floor. Like many birds, she was better about stepping up from the floor - so, again, it was “EASY - STEP UP!”, “GOOD BIRD”, then lots of praise and “THANK YOU” and a small treat with each triumphant step up. Soon she became brave about this as well.

E. Results and Rewards

Each of these birds made amazing progress. Love grew, and trust, and fun. Perhaps because we both had to work at the relationship, there was a special closeness.

Mimi became the light of my life for several years. She was happiest when cuddled in my hand up against my chest. We took walks together, went to the bank, went to events, and I took her on airplanes with me. I got a little birdie hammock for her from Eggcentric Eggcessories™ which I could set up on its stand so she could hang out in it wherever we went.

The severity of her burn injuries meant she always had to wear bandages, and had recurring pain (for which she got



Mimi in her hammock hanging out at For Other Living Things during an event. She loved this hammock – it was comfortable and secure, and she enjoyed chewing on the beads.

pain medications, of course) – but she had a joyous loving spirit, very different from the defeated little girl who arrived at Wildwood. I lost her to cancer, and miss her to this day. Sadly, I have no good photos of her and me together.



Jubilee getting a kiss.

Jubilee got very comfortable with stepping up. He would sit happily on my lap or my shoulder. He never got comfortable with petting (I think the fact that he could not see hands coming worried him) which was hard for me because I wanted so much to wrap him up in my arms and just love him - but that would have sent him into a screaming, biting panic. I let him set the pace, tell me what felt safe for him – and he would reach up and kiss me and cuddle into my neck and I could lean over and kiss his head as long as I did not try to pet him. Once he came to trust our signaling system, and that I would not do things that scared him, he stopped biting. He has been living happily with a wonderful family now for about two years.

Princess is still with me. She wants to be with me. She steps up, cuddles, kisses, and is very affectionate. Her panic attacks are now brief and infrequent, though she does still have them if I misread her body language or push her too fast, or something startles her. Because her balance is a little off, I walk slowly when she is on my arm or my shoulder, which has increased her confidence in me. She has indeed become a Princess.



It's all good!

A Note About Biting

I do not enjoy getting bitten. I am not thrilled at the sight of my own blood. But it happens, and I have learned it is best to respond without drama while figuring out what happened from the bird's point of view (and putting on the bandage). If a bird seems particularly volatile, I develop strategies to work with them which keep my tender flesh out of reach - step up perches, swinging them on the ends of towels, for example, so we can still work together and the bird can have fun with me (this sometimes happens with birds who are boarding with me). Usually biting lessens considerably over time, and I have never felt the need to stop working with a bird because of bites. That said, I have never worked with a bird with deep-seated hostility and aggression.

Conclusion

Taking the bird where s/he is and not where we want them to be is the guiding principal throughout building this relationship - it is the cornerstone of respect. We all want someone to love us "just the way we are" - some birds are cuddly, some are more reserved, some are very high energy and into everything, others more relaxed. You can have wonderful relationships with all of those birds.

From the tiniest budgie to the biggest macaw, parrots are passionate, and complex. They are worthy partners, fabulous and unique companions. Like any real relationship, it takes work, and there are bad days when it feels like you cannot get it right. In my experience, a sincere apology when you screw up goes a long way with your birds. Once parrots love and trust you, they can be pretty good about rolling with the punches - after all, wild parrots squabble from time to time, and even the best of human marriages have tough times.

So if you meet a bird that speaks to your heart - I say GO FOR IT. Give both of you the best you've got, listen to your gut, make a commitment to love – and may the Force be with you!