



Squawk Talk

## Training Sun Conures to Improve Visitor Interaction

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## Background...

- 6 keeper staff caring for birds at 4 separate buildings.
- Only public avian exhibit is a large, free flight, natural habitat aviary consisting of mostly passerines.
- Prior to 2012, bird keepers did very minimal training.
- Minimal psittacine collection.



-6 person staff caring for 4 buildings. (Aviary and 3 off-exhibit propagation/holding facilities.)

-Only public exhibit is a large, free flight, natural habitat aviary containing mostly passerines and waterfowl – minimal interactive experience potential. Aviary dimensions: 138' Diameter 55' High

-Prior to 2012 we did very minimal bird training.

Focus was more on breeding many of the species in our collection.

Thought that training would disrupt “normal” bird behavior and breeding.

-Minimal psittacines in our collection (1.1 Eclectus Parrots and 11.4 Blue-crowned Hanging Parrots).

## How it all started...

- Push for increased visitor interactions around park ~2011.
- How can we increase interest and excitement about birds?
- Bird keepers began considering training birds for public interactions.
- Came across several roadblocks:
  - BUDGET – State-run facility
  - Appropriate birds
  - Keeper skills



-Around 2011 there was a push from upper management for increased keeper/visitor interaction. – Make visitors happy!

-We have an education department offering animal encounters, however, the park is very large which limits the areas they can reach with these encounters.

-Started with keeper talks and progressed from there.

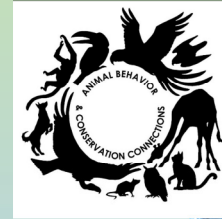
-Keepers began to brainstorm about ways to engage the public and get them excited about birds.

-We are a state run institution with restricted budget and no area/amphitheater for “shows”

-Ventured into the idea of training birds for visitor interactions. However, we quickly realized that many birds already in our collection weren’t appropriate for the training we wanted to do AND many keepers needed further instruction on training techniques.

## Evolution...

- In 2012 we obtained the help of Phung Luu of Animal Behavior and Conservation Connections and Dr. Susan Friedman of Behaviorworks.
- Developed a new way of thinking and interacting with our animals using effective operant conditioning.
- Realized we would have more success with hand raised birds.
  - “Right Tool For The Job”
- Acquired a small flock of juvenile hand-reared Sun Conures to use for programming in our free flight exhibit.



- In 2012 we began a contract with Phung Luu (Animal Behavior and Conservation Connections) and Dr. Susan Friedman (BehaviorWorks).
- We had to adjust to a new way of thinking and interacting with our animals using operant conditioning.
- Also, needed birds that were “hand raised” “right tool for the job”.
- Phung works with a very large flock of Sun Conures for his visitor interactions and felt they would be an appropriate project for our institution.
- Plan was to demonstrate a flight behavior in our large, free flight aviary.



## Where to Begin?!

- Going from minimal parrot interaction to a flock of conures! 🤪
- With Phung's guidance, training plans, and videos...
  - Desensitized conures to red welding mittens.
  - Trained them to enter and exit kennel via welding mitten.
  - Desensitized them to transport from Avian Propagation to Aviary.
  - Introduced them to the Aviary.
  - Trained them to fly, on cue, as a flock from one keeper to another keeper/visitor.
  - Re-kennel them following program.



-Where to begin?

-Due to their destructive nature, the conures were housed at our Avian Propagation building as opposed to in the Aviary.

-Through Phung's guidance, training plans, videos, etc...

-Steps of desensitizing the conures to 2 red welding mittens (didn't have to invest as much time into desensitizing to people because they were hand raised), entering/exiting kennel, transport, introduction to Aviary, flying in aviary, rekenneling.



## Necessities...

- Supplies needed:
- 2 wire dog kennels
- Set of red welding mittens
- Large supply of safflower seeds.



- I opted to use 2 kennels instead of 1 to ensure all conures had enough space in order to minimize aggression when traveling.
- The kennels are wire dog kennels, measuring 19x14x13 inches.
- The open sides help with desensitization to the “outside world” and allow for easier administration of reinforcers.

## Challenges...

- Flying indoors only.
- Appropriate housing at the Avian Propagation building.
- Utilizing diet management.
- Resources-
  - Time
  - Patience
  - Staffing
- Training multiple birds amidst flock dynamics.



- Housed off exhibit due to destruction of plants in the Aviary so it was necessary to have stainless steel caging.
- Due to the location of our zoo and the abundance of local predators, we are only able to fly the conures inside at this point.
- How would resident aviary birds react to the conure visits?
- I found I needed to ensure the conures were motivated to participate in the training. This required some use of diet management.
  - Training the birds prior to their AM feed.
  - Providing them with fruit/veggie mix and parrot pellets measured out 2x daily.
    - On a program day, pellets given in kennel following program.
    - This further increases the value of returning to the kennel.
    - Hopeful scale training in the future.
- This project (along with many others) has required a great deal of resources. I have had to be flexible with my schedule and efficient with my time to train the birds as well as time to do programs. This requires understanding and help from my co-workers, both in picking up extra work and assisting with my visitor programs in the Aviary. Since the program is entirely voluntary, it was required a fair share of patience (both with myself and the birds) as well.
- And by the far the most challenging was training multiple birds amidst their varying personalities and flock dynamics. Although, having a flock can be beneficial as well – often if one bird “gets it”, the rest will follow suit.





## ★ Successes... ★

- Memorable visitor experiences:
  - Surprise pop-up encounters, special tours, Make A Wish visits, office visits, meetings, etc.
  - Visitors can safely interact with birds using the welding mitten.
- Creates increased awareness and interest in birds.
- Able to spread message of “responsible parrot ownership.”
- Personal growth and development, increased confidence, improved public speaking skills and teamwork.



-The visitor interaction has been extremely rewarding. We have been able to program with the birds at surprise pop-up encounters in the Aviary, and use them for special tours such as donors and Make A Wish children. The birds have also been desensitized to office settings and have attended many meetings and luncheons.

-Visitors can safely interact and “catch” the flying birds using the welding mitten. – This gives people a “hands on” experience, thus increasing their interest and appreciation for birds.

-By allowing people an interactive encounter with these birds, we are better able to spread the messages of responsible parrot ownership and wildlife conservation. (Sun Conures uplisted to “endangered” in 2008)

-On a personal level, this training project has helped me to advance my training skills, parrot husbandry skills, time management skills, increased my visitor interaction skills, public speaking skills.

-Teamwork – managing rest of job responsibilities with help from my co-workers.





# Questions?

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