



## Royal Animal Hospital

# Talking & Intelligence in African Greys



by Sally Blanchard

### Talking Timetable

Young hand-fed African grey parrots may start to mumble human sounds at a few weeks of age. Just as wild parrots learn natural vocalizations from their parents, companion parrots learn to imitate human sounds from their "surrogate parents." The first words they learn are usually simple words their owners have repeated often with enthusiasm like 'Hello', 'UP', 'Hi!', or 'Wanna Bite'.

Some greys start talking at a young age while it is not unusual for others to start talking after they are over a year old. I am often surprised when people tell me their greys are not talking, yet I listen to them and I hear words. Parrots learn to talk much like small children. When they hear certain words over and over, they start practicing the sounds. At first the sounds are simply incoherent mumbling but the proper inflections are often there. This is the origin of much 'baby-talk' in humans. Just as small children need an adult to listen carefully to pick up what the child is trying to say, young greys also need a human to reinforce the words they are trying to learn and teach them to say the words correctly. Pay close attention to the mumbling and you will begin to hear the words as they develop. Remember although a grey baby may be fully feathered and looks much like an adult, they are still learning a great deal. Don't expect too much. Your six month old baby grey will not learn the "Gettysburg Address." Be patient - and work with your youngster even though he may just be mumbling incoherently. Successful learning in intelligent species often requires more maturity.

Greys who have shown no indication of talking by the time it is 2 or 3 years old may not become good talkers. However, I do know of many exceptions. These are often birds who are placed in new situations where they receive more stimulation and attention. Please do not misconstrue this to mean that if your grey does not talk, he is unhappy with you. Many of the non-talking greys I have met have been contented parrots. Another misconception I have heard is that parrots will not learn anything new after a certain age. This is absolute nonsense. Bongo Marie, my grey who is at least 25 but may be well over 40, is constantly learning new words, expressions, sounds, and even sentences.

### The Importance of Interaction

Not all greys talk and not all of them are incredible talkers. These parrots still develop endearing personalities and should be cherished despite the fact they do not meet the stereotypical expectations people have about greys. Some will only learn a few words and phrases. In some cases, it simply may be that they are not as smart as other greys who talk well. Often, however, it is not their level of intelligence but the fact they have not received the stimulation and responses necessary to encourage their talking abilities.

Occasionally, I will meet a healthy playful well-loved mature African grey who does not talk. I am not always sure why this is true but I am often reminded of a friend who years ago was concerned that her year old son had some

sort of developmental problem or was hard of hearing because he was not talking nearly as well as his older sister. She took him to several doctors who could not find any sort of physical problem. Finally, she talked to a person who did research with developmental stages in children. The reason her son had not developed his speaking skills was quite simple. He had not needed to - his loquacious sister did all his talking for him. It was often as if she read his mind and immediately took care of everything he needed without him ever having to ask for anything.

This may provide a clue to the reason some parrots talk better than others. Greys learn to talk for many of the same reasons young children learn to talk - to be a part of the social group, to get attention, to entertain themselves, and to express their needs. Without interaction, stimulation, and both verbal and tangible reward responses to their vocalizations, even an intelligent grey may not learn to talk well.

### **Extra Grey Matter?**

I have read that the African grey parrot actually has more convolutions in its brain than other species of parrots. Whether this is true or not, when they start talking - watch out! Greys may learn almost anything that is said with enthusiasm and imitate any noise that intrigues them. Although they have a reputation for being quiet birds, some can be quite noisy as African grey parrots are usually as noisy as their environment. Watch what you say to an African grey. While it may occasionally seem funny for greys to use unacceptable language they pick up by accident, people who purposefully teach their greys to use foul language will regret it.

Words said with enthusiasm - especially words with hard consonants - are very easy for greys to learn and it usually takes a great deal of knowledge, patience and consistency to "unteach" them. The young bird imitates the sounds we make to gain acceptance in it's 'flock' - us! Whistling seems to be a fun noise for birds because of its high pitch. I do believe that a grey that is taught to whistle and is rewarded with whistling before it learns to talk may not learn to talk as quickly or as well. The parrot has no need to use words to get our attention.

### **Label Objects And Events**

Teach your grey associations. Repeat the same words with enthusiasm each time you do anything with your bird. For example, say 'see you later!' each time leave or 'good to see you!' when you return. The loquacious African grey will reward you by saying the proper words for each event. On a fairly complex level (although not as complex as human intelligence), they really do know what they are saying. African Greys are one of the few parrots that are consistently capable of responsive conversation. I have taught Bongo Marie a dozen or more animal imitations. If I say 'cat got your tongue,' she responds with a plaintive 'meow.' When I say 'Hey Turkey', she says, 'gobble, gobble, gobble'. She also knows the proper responses to many questions. I ask her 'How are you' and she usually says 'Fine, thank you, how are you?' When she is being a good and ask her in a pleasant tone of voice, "What are you doing?", she says "nothing much" but if she has climbed onto the table next to her cage and is ripping through a breakfast cereal box, I'll say "WHAT ARE YOU DOING!" and she answers with an edge of irritation, 'None of your business!'

Most greys will play with words, coming up with statements that seem to make no sense. Bongo Marie has said many things I have never taught her and sometimes it is difficult or even embarrassing to try to explain how she learned such a thing. One day several years ago, she leaned over from the side of her cage and grabbed a visitor's shirt exclaiming, "I'm gonna scratch your bottom!" And for years, one of her favourite questions to ask everyone is, "Where's your poodle?" I never taught her either expression and have only speculation about how she learned these words or why she says them so often. Her other classic question which she often asks people is "Who do you are?" This one I can figure out. It is her special version of "What are your doing" and "Who do you think you are?", two other expressions she says frequently.

## Teaching Responsive Conversation

The trick to teaching a grey responsive conversation is to say the question quietly in a boring monotone and then the response with great enthusiasm! The first part is not interesting enough for them to bother mimicking but the parrot still associates it with the more exciting second part which is intriguing enough to learn. After a while the intelligent grey will reward you with the appropriate response. Although most greys will usually only talk when they cannot see you or when you are not paying attention to them, working with your bird can easily create a parrot who will talk on cue. There is no acceptable reason to ever deprive a companion parrot of food to get it to do any kind of tricks, including verbal responses. With affectionate training, most talking greys will easily learn to respond with verbal cues and verbal praises.

## Living Up To Their Reputation

Many African grey parrots will learn to talk without their owners taking the time to teach them. However, the best talking birds have owners that take the time to teach them words and expressions. The best methods encourage association of words with objects, events or even emotions by labeling them for the bird. I find that the talking tapes and CDs are usually ineffective for anything but mimicry although they may be valuable for reinforcing expressions that the bird has already learned.

Laboratory studies with Alex and the other greys in Dr. Irene Pepperberg's Laboratory at the University of Arizona in Tucson, have shown that they learn best with social interaction. Dr. Pepperberg uses a model/rival method of teaching the greys to identify objects with cognition. Two people sit with Alex in front of them. One person shows the object to the other, labels it, and then asks the second person to identify it. If the person mislabels it or mispronounces the word, they are asked again with no reward. If the second person labels the object correctly, they receive the object as the reward. Then the attention is transferred to the bird with the same requests. Although the time it takes the bird to identify the object correctly may vary, if he is successful in his attempt, he is rewarded by being given that object. Alex has learned to identify not only the name of the object, but also many of its other characteristics such as color, shape, texture, and how many there are.

He also has learned to distinguish what is the same or different about many of these characteristics when shown different objects. Alex occasionally also has his petulant moments when he purposefully either answers wrong or refuses to answer. This famous grey is a remarkable parrot but a person sharing their life with a grey should never expect to have a bird whose cognitive skills are as greatly developed as his are. Alex has received intensive instruction from many students in a laboratory setting over almost two decades.

For hundreds of years, the African grey has had the legendary reputation of being the best talking parrot. Dr. Pepperberg's studies with Alex have clearly shown their cognitive ability to understand the meaning of words and phrases. The most common question asked about parrots is "Can he talk?" With African grey parrots the answer is usually yes but the quality of 'conversation' depends on the time the owner has spent interacting with their bird and teaching it to talk. Although they will imitate many sounds and words on their own, the ones who delight people with appropriate 'conversation' are those who have an owner who respects their African grey's gray matter.