

AMAZONS THE GREAT EAVESDROPPERS

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WHERE DID THAT COME FROM

Many bird owners are surprised to hear a parrot say something out of the blue that they have never heard them say before. They wonder how and why this happened as they never heard the bird try to say any of the words, yet it was said very clearly. To add to the mystery, sometimes these very clear statements fit into the conversation. Where did the bird learn that?

This is not unusual at all. Many years ago I was recording my Amazons by tape recorder during the day and then listening with headphones to the tapes and writing what I heard after the birds went to sleep at night. Since my computer was in the same room as the birds, I used headphones so as not to disturb them as well as to hear the tape more clearly.

To my amazement they would often hear a phrase and not show any signs of repeating it until days, weeks, or even months later. Now I know they were not practicing on the sly as I had a voice activated tape recorder and made certain there was always enough tape to record what they said. Yet, when they would say it, the word or sentence came out very clear and easy to understand.

However, they also practice things they have heard. The practice is often done as mutterings and mumblings. When playing the tape over and over and either slowing it down or speeding it up, I could better understand what they were practicing. The tone and rhythm they use gives clues as to what they were practicing.

A GOOD SCOLDING

An incident tipped me off to birds repeating things they heard several days later without lengthy practice. My Nape T.J. (Tequila Joe) had been particularly bad....screaming and misbehaving in general. Several days later in an angry voice, I heard my words that I had said to T.J. repeated as I monitored their daily tapes. Not only the same words, but with the same feeling. You could hear the emotion in the tone when T.J. said it.

I had talked angrily to T.J. about his screaming and hearing it through headphones was enough to drive me to drink. I cringed when I heard T.J. duplicating my voice. Did I really sound that awful? After hearing his rendition of my lecture, I quickly changed my methods.

What did this do to T.J.? Well, he almost never screams.....but he also never talks in front of people. One has to remember this was many years ago and he was a little over a year old. I would not have talked to him the way I did had I known then what I know now. For years he would tell the other birds that they were bad when they screamed. I would hear him tell them, "Bad birds. Bad birds." When I would walk into the room he

would add, "T.J. is a good boy." He let me know in no uncertain terms that it was not him screaming!

SENSITIVE TO OUR REACTIONS

Some parrots are very sensitive to the way we react. T.J. is one of those birds. By the time Blue-front Amazon Kodiak came along, I was much better with the way I talked to the boys (I have all male Amazons) about things they had done wrong. Some of my other birds (especially my Nape Magnum) are not that sensitive and require stronger discipline than T.J. or Kodiak.

This incident clearly showed me that birds are all individuals and what may seem like a light correction to one bird may be a severe correction to another. Magnum was also in the room when I yelled at T.J. for screaming. It didn't faze him in the least and to this day shows what healthy lungs he has when he decides to scream.

Also, birds learn to say things that excite them or relate to a person they either like or dislike intensely. This again was gained by listening through hours and hours of tapes of my birds and putting the words with incidents that had happened during the day. When drama is involved with the words, they are more apt to learn them than in hearing the words in a casual conversation. Perhaps this is why so many parrots pick up swear words so easily. The drama learned words are seldom muttered or practiced and seem to come out clearly at a later date.

INCREDIBLE MEMORIES

Amazons have incredible memories. My performing birds can be pulled from training and performing for several years, yet when they perform again, they remember all their tricks as if they took a week's vacation. When you combine the Amazon's great memory with their natural talent for mimicking and duplicating speech, you can understand how something they heard weeks or months earlier is suddenly repeated perfectly. When a bird is excited, he often shares things he has heard weeks or even months before.

I find it very amusing that birds become excited about the telephone and some can repeat very long telephone conversations years after they happened. This was my Blue-fronted Amazon Boomer who told me so much about a place where he once lived by repeating many telephone conversations. He barely talked at the two previous owner's places, but after I took him for his first papilloma surgery, he began to feel better and started talking. He began repeating many, many telephone conversations that happened years before.

What he was saying was not something a person would try to teach a bird. He had a very large vocabulary from conversations that he had overheard. From what I gathered from the conversations, it was at a place that had a large number of birds and was in the business of buying and selling them. Obviously he was kept near the phone. Some of his sentences were:

"Did you like the bird?"

"Robert, get the bird."

"Buy the bird."

"Sell the bird."

"Where do you want the bird?"

"What's wrong with the bird?"

"George, Robert is out right now."

"Robert will be back by 5:30."

Clearly these were overheard conversations. He would talk a lot about Robert and George and I felt at times as if I were listening to a soap opera. I could tell he had several homes from the different phrases and the voices he used. However, the largest part of his vocabulary came from the place where birds were bought and sold and he used a woman's voice when repeating them.

TRAUMATIC SITUATION

Blue-fronted Amazon Pepper was put in a pet store after he tried killing his previous owner's newborn baby. It was very traumatic for him as he had been very spoiled and resented the presence of the baby. He had been the center of attention before the human baby arrived. Everything in the pet store became deeply etched in his mind. To this day, many years later, when he gets excited he begins saying, "Send the bird on credit" and goes into a varied account of buying and selling birds over the phone!

I have a friend that recently got an older Nape. He is also dropping hints of his former owners. My friend is clearly hearing the cries and pain of a child! It is upsetting her very much as these are done with great feeling. Right now he does a lot of muttering along with the cries. Some day he may speak these clearly and we may know what he had witnessed.

If you have a bird, especially an Amazon, be very careful about what they hear. They may never say anything while you own them, but years later they are apt to tell many family secrets. After all, Amazons are the great eavesdroppers!

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