

LET'S SPEAK TO THE ANIMALS

SOME PETS CAN
ACTUALLY TALK BACK

— IN WORDS

BY BOB KEEFER



Looking for a pet with whom you can enjoy a meaningful conversation?

Consider a member of the parrot family. These smart, sassy birds — the family includes everything from small parakeets to giant colorful macaws — not only imitate the sounds they hear in day-to-day life, their owners say they actually verbalize about as well as a human toddler.

To check on that, I called Exotic Bird Rescue of Oregon (EBR), a quarter-century-old organization based in Springfield. Its members provide homes to dozens of birds that are, for various reasons, without owners.

My call led to an afternoon visit with Tarie Crawford, a board member of the group, who at the moment was taking care of about 17 birds at her Springfield home.

We were joined by board members Tania Baildon and her husband, Michael McKinley, and on arrival I was promptly introduced to Sebastian, a beautiful orange, yellow, green and blue Catalina macaw they've had for two years. Sebastian may legally belong to them both but he is clearly McKinley's bird.

I watched, fascinated, as the two of them cuddled and cooed with each other.

But their initial meeting two years ago was a bit rocky. On their first day together, McKinley leaned down to pick Sebastian up off the floor. The bird promptly bit him on the hand. A week after that, Sebastian bit him so hard across the nose that McKinley went to the doctor.

(To demonstrate the power of that beak, McKinley had me watch as Sebastian effortlessly shelled a brazil nut and ate it.)

Cuddling Sebastian is no longer a blood sport. "I can roll him over in my hands and pet him like a puppy," McKinley says. The initial hostility, he says, was a trust issue. "And I've earned a lot of trust with him. He's learned I am safe."

Crawford's home has gone, you might say, entirely to the birds. We start the tour in a noisy back bedroom that is lined with cages, where Sherby and Merlin, a pair of obstreperous cockatoos, check me out and call loudly back and forth.

Next door in the separate "little bird room," an unlikely pair has begun a courtship. A female lovebird named Gizmo and a male parakeet named Auto have set up housekeeping together high on a closet shelf in a foot-tall nest built out of strips the birds have torn from newspapers lining the floor of the room under the cages.

The pair has, ahem, consummated their romance, Crawford says, but because they are of different species there won't be any chicks in the newspaper nest. When I check back a few weeks later, there have been not only no chicks but no eggs, and Crawford has disassembled the nest, which was reaching the closet ceiling. Gizmo is rebuilding it already.

"It gives her something to do," Crawford says.

EBR, which was founded in 2004 and partners with Greenhill Humane Society, takes in parrots of any kind in any condition. The long-lived birds — some species can actually live for nearly a century — regularly survive their owners, and part of the responsibility of being a parrot owner is making arrangements to pass your bird on when you die.

And then there are the abused and neglected birds that come to EBR.

Jackie, a slightly forlorn looking cockatoo I meet in Crawford's living room, was left by a previous owner in a cage by herself for 10 years, Crawford says. Jackie has a bare chest from plucking her own feathers out and requires physical therapy because she sat so long on a single perch that her feet have atrophied.

Then there's Merlin, the cockatoo I'd met in the back, who had been injured with scalding hot water and had her sternum crushed before arriving at EBR. "When she came into rescue it took a year until she felt safe," Crawford says. "Now she's become a nice sweet bird. She clucks like a chicken. She says, 'What are you doing?'"

Merlin replies by ringing a bell in her cage and calling out, "Hello!"

Which brings up the question: Do macaws, parakeets, lorikeets and the rest of the parrot family actually talk, in any meaningful sense? I mean, we all talk to our dogs and cats, and it's clear that dogs, anyway, understand a lot of English words. (Cats wouldn't admit it even if they did understand you.)

But dogs and cats can't vocalize verbal responses.

Parrots, in general, are excellent mimics — not only of words and phrases but of such sounds as ringing telephones, video games and chainsaws, to give just a few examples. So when a bird looks you in the eye and says, "Let's eat!" is it asking for food? Or is it just imitating a sound it's heard you make in the kitchen?

One answer to that question comes from Alex, a famous African gray parrot that learned from animal psychologist Irene Pepperberg to use a vocabulary of more than 100 words before he died in 2007. The bird would ask for food, correctly describe the color of his toys and even sympathize ("I'm sorry!") when Pepperberg was irritated at something.

Alex's last words the night before he died, apparently of natural causes, were, "You be good, see you tomorrow. I love you," according to his obituary in the *New York Times*.

Crawford says her African gray named Laurie is definitely communicating — not just imitating.

"African grays are very good at language," Crawford says. "When we're watching TV and she sees something on the TV that's really sad, she'll say, 'Awww.' She totally knows what she's saying. She enters into conversations totally following what we say."

Adopting a parrot from EBR isn't as simple as buying a goldfish at the pet store. The organization requires new owners to take a two-hour class in bird care, covering lighting, food, socialization and safety, and will schedule a home visit to make sure you're prepared for the commitment of owning a bird who may well outlive you.

EBR charges a fee — around \$30 for a small finch and on up to several hundred dollars for a macaw, or about half of what it would cost to buy the same birds on the open market.

"And the thing we really insist on is, if you get a bird from us, you promise not to breed it or sell it," Baildon says.

More information about Exotic Bird Rescue and the ins and outs of adoption can be found at rescuebird.com. ■