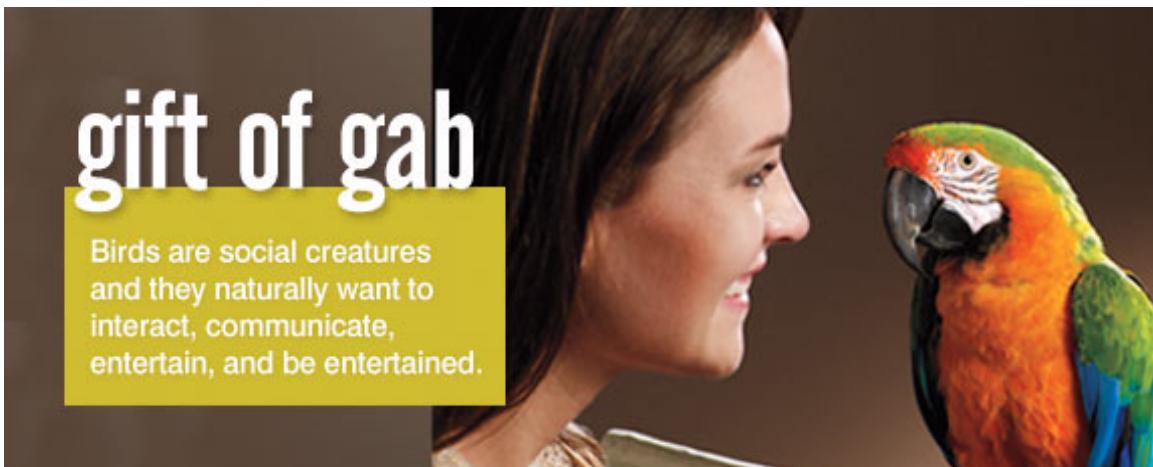


## Bird Brains: Why Birds Talk

Drs. Foster & Smith Educational Staff



Our feathered friends are among the most intelligent of creatures. Aviculturists see evidence that companion birds, especially psittacines (like parrots), even have the ability to engage in complex communication. Birds are social creatures in the wild, and when brought into our homes, they naturally view us as part of their social group, wanting to interact, communicate, entertain, and be entertained.

All wild birds learn to mimic their parents and adults of their species early in life. Some can even mimic the sounds of other wild birds. Most known for this behavior are myna birds, the Australian Lyrebird, and the mockingbird. A bird's ability to understand or speak another bird's language can be very valuable in the wild. But what about those birds who learn to mimic human speech? Although mimicry may have survival benefits in the wild, in the safety and shelter of our homes, a pet bird learns to mimic our voice primarily because the sound is interesting to him - and it gets attention.

This is why yelling at a screaming parrot will do more harm than good - you are giving him exactly the attention he seeks. Fortunately, you can direct this natural attention-seeking behavior by purposefully teaching your bird to speak.

### Teaching your bird to talk

Much like a human child, a pet bird will make unintelligible noises at the beginning of his training and develop words from there. It is important to know that the more language they are exposed to, the more language they will learn.

Repeat words or phrases to ensure that your bird will mimic your voice. Be aware of what you say in front of your pet once your bird does learn to talk. More than one owner has been embarrassed by something that has come out of their bird's mouth when company is around. The most effective course of action you can take when your bird is repeating something unwanted is to ignore it, and not provide reinforcement - either positive or negative.

You may also choose to use a tape recorder or a prerecorded CD. You can choose the word or phrase you want your bird to learn and simply set your CD player on repeat.

Whichever method you use, you may find that your bird will not respond during the lesson, but will remember at another time. Some bird owners are surprised when their bird does not respond right away. Remember that a bird is most likely to speak when he wants to get your attention. **Triggers**

Companion bird speech peaks at certain times of the day, such as sunset and sunrise - think of a crowing rooster. These times of day also coincide with the peaks that wild songbirds have in singing.

Also, a bird is likely to mimic a sound that occurs regularly - be it the sound of the microwave before dinner or your daily greeting returning home each night. Higher frequency sounds and voices are more likely to interest birds - and to be mimicked - than low frequency sounds.

### The science of avian vocalization

How birds make sounds is still the subject of many studies. We use vibrations of our vocal cords to vocalize and our tongue and lips to form



words. A human's vocal cords are located in the larynx. Birds also have a larynx, but avian speech is not made in the same way. Birds also have a structure in their throats called a syrinx, which is thought to be the source of the sounds they make. The syrinx has a pair of structures called medial tympaniform membranes, which produce a flow of air in the throat that results in sounds. It is also thought that a bird's unique respiratory structure, including multiple air sacs, has a function in causing the vibrations of the tympaniform membranes and thus, sound and speech.

### Why won't my bird talk?

Not all birds that can speak, will. Your best bet, if you are determined to have a talking bird, is to adopt an older bird that talks already. Also, a fearful bird will not be likely to speak. Speaking, like singing, is the sign of a healthy, happy, contented bird. Birds can learn to talk from other birds, but sometimes if a bird has another bird companion, he will be less likely to talk, since he is probably already getting the attention he craves.

African Greys are probably best known for their amazing ability to mimic not only the human voice but also an impressive array of environmental sounds.

*Cockatiels can talk with training at 8-10 months.*

*Hyacinth Macaws are extremely intelligent, good talkers, but may only speak for the person with whom they bond.*

*Moluccan Cockatoos can be taught to talk with positive training.*

