

Not your usual parrot person

Dot Schwarz meets **ANN CASTRO**, a parrot-behaviour therapist with a growing reputation for avian trouble-shooting

PARROTS

CANADIAN-BORN Ann Castro enjoys a reputation in Germany, where she now lives, as a parrot-behaviour therapist and writer of exceptional training books. She's becoming increasingly well-known in this part of the world, too.

Ann grew up with hands-on knowledge of budgies, cockatiels, chickens, ducks and assorted wild birds. Her mother bred budgies. Both parents worked in the human medical field, her father as a psychiatrist and neurologist and her mother a general practitioner.

Ann recalls her mum dissecting an egg-bound budgerigar on the kitchen table to show the kids what had happened. "I've loved birds all my life," she says.

Ann took an MBA before going to Germany to work as an investment banker. Hector, an African grey, her first large bird, came to her while she was working in New York. Twelve years later, he is still part of the flock.

Meanwhile, Ann adopted Louise in 2005. The bird had chronic, severe aspergillosis and the family did not want to pay the veterinary costs.

The vet gave Louise a probable life expectancy of six months. However, Ann decided to go ahead and treat the condition. Louise improved: she mated with Hector. Eight years after the six-month prognosis, she holds court in a corner of the birdroom. "The macaws are terrified of her," Ann says.

Ann believes that when treating birds and animals you should apply the same principles that you would to people-management: "Treat your parrot as you would a cherished employee," she advises.

"Motivate them, let them take the initiative, reward them when they do something right." So how does this approach differ from the principles of positive reinforcement? "It's simply about coming from a different angle – not training the bird, but building a relationship with it," she replies.

One of her key themes is related to *artgerechte Haltung*, which roughly translates as "species-appropriate

keeping". Ann believes that those keeping birds should use the creatures' natural-living conditions as their guideline. Each captive parrot should be kept with a mate of the same species and opposite gender.

She goes further, and says it is even better to keep a mini-flock. These ideas appear less maverick in Germany, where the government's guidelines (1995) advocate such practices, than they might do here. Government-appointed vets are empowered to assess the conditions parrots are kept in and can confiscate birds. Ann says not every owner is aware of the welfare law, however.

The German guidelines state: *With few exceptions, parrots live in pairs or in groups. As a rule, they must be kept like that in captivity... The requirement for keeping parrots in pairs should be pointed out when selling them and [they] should only be sold in pairs. Parrots should be allowed to breed, if the offspring can be provided for.*

Breeding problems overcome

How does Ann Castro prevent breeding and aggression, since she advocates keeping birds in pairs uncaged and unclipped? "If you don't provide nesting opportunities, that takes care of 90 per cent of the breeding problems, while an enriched environment will further lessen the breeding urge," she says.

"I know some people in the Anglo-Saxon world are terribly offended when I tell them that it's not OK to keep a parrot without a mate, with clipped wings, and in a small cage. Luckily, there are many parrot owners who, once introduced to the concept, embrace it wholeheartedly."

Ann opposes the commercial hand-raising of parrots as exploitative. "Parrots are intelligent, social creatures. It is physically and mentally detrimental to remove eggs or chicks from their parents,



Ann's flock of African greys give proof that parrots kept with mates and in a flock are wonderful pets

Photo: David Jayne



Rescue greenwing macaw Mr Darcy goes through lumber in seconds

Photo: Ann Castro



Photo: David Jayne

Clicker training is perfect for teaching parrots medical procedures such as taking medicine

hand-rear the progeny and force the parents to produce several times a year."

So would this approach work with Amazons? Says Ann: "I get more questions regarding aggression in this bird than I do about any other, including cockatoos. But they're one of the most easily trained types of parrot. I've seen a turn-around in their

behaviour in just one afternoon. Why? They're highly intelligent; and they love their treats. Almost any problem can be resolved, if the owner changes his/her behaviour."

Ann lives in a converted farmhouse near Frankfurt. Her birdroom (a conversion of several smaller spaces) measures 4m x 14m (13ft x 46ft), with a ceiling height of 5-9m (16.5ft-30ft). She'd prefer to keep single species but, since her birds are mostly rehomed and rescues (so-called "problem birds"), they are mixed. In the birdroom, the flock has trees and wood to destroy. The birds enjoy bathing in two

70cm-diameter bowls, and they have each other to play with, which they do vigorously. In summer the protected glass roof windows are open.

Ann started a not-for-profit company – AdIA Papageienhilfe gGmbH – in 2003 to help birds and their owners via books and coaching. She also runs an English-language Facebook page with more than 6,000 members. She answers several queries a day on parrot care.

Four of her 10 German books have been translated into English. She believes her ideas on clicker training are not new, but that her species-appropriate keeping guidelines are. These have not yet been widely adopted by the Anglo-Saxon bird community.

Ann's advice to any prospective parrot owners? "Please consider adoption of a second-hand bird – many of them are incredibly sweet. Wherever your bird

comes from, you must acquire behaviour skills as a parrot-owner, or that cute baby bird from the pet shop will develop the same problems as second-hand parrots can display."

Dot Schwarz shares her life with 10 different species of psittacine.

Parrot rehab

TWO case studies illustrate the sort of work Ann does with both parrots and owners. Ann was called to a US army base, where the family's clipped blue-and-gold macaw was lunging at each family member who passed his perch. They asked Ann to adopt the bird. She sensitised him to the clicker and delivered a treat with a long spoon. Within three hours he was sucking her fingers. "The bird had been lunging simply because it was so desperate for contact and affection." When the family saw the turn around in its behaviour, they decided to keep the bird. Ann's still in touch with the family after 10 years – he turned out to be a hen! With fully grown-out wings and a mate of the same species, the pair cherished members of the household.

Mr Darcy has had several owners. He was found in a supermarket trolley in indescribable filth. The elderly owner was persuaded to relinquish the bird and, after quarantine and vet tests, he joined Anne's household. "He was said to be super aggressive, but by the second day he was cuddling with me," she says. He lived for three years and became one of her closest companions. He died in her arms this January and she still misses him.



Photo: David Jayne

Ann believes that macaws are just as easy to train as other smaller parrot species

Macaws are one of the most easily trained types of parrot

i Ann Castro's website – www.thebirdschool.com – includes videos and information on her training methods.