

Ask Cheryl

Animal behavior tips

This week:
The Screaming Conure



Q: I'm hoping you can help me with a bird problem. I have a Conure named Petey who is very loud. He screams as soon as I walk in the door and every time I leave the room. If I don't instantly appear, he starts screaming louder. I rent a room in someone's house, and they are starting to complain about the noise. They said if I can't get it under control, Petey will have to go. I can't afford to move right now, but I can't even imagine giving Petey up. Is there anything I can do to change his behavior?

A: There are a lot of similarities in animal behavior across the different species, so although this is a bird question, keep reading you dog and cat lovers - you might just learn something to help with your animals. Different breeds of dogs tend to be inclined to bark more than others. The same is true in the bird world. Conures happen to love to make noise. Don't get me wrong, there are other birds who are screamers too, but I hear this complaint about Conures more than any other bird. Does that mean you can't do anything about the problem? Of course not, but you have to be willing to put the work into training.

The main reason animals make noise is to get attention. It usually works. The bird screams for someone; the person wants the bird to be quiet; the person gives the bird what he wants. Just like a spoiled child, the unwanted behavior becomes worse, because it is working. The key is to make sure it no longer works, and to teach an alternative behavior that does work. Just ignoring the behavior will not make it go away unless you also reward desired behaviors.

For example, one bird I worked with screamed every time her human opened a box of crackers (yes, images of "Polly wants a cracker" come to mind). To quiet the bird, she walked over to the cage and gave him a cracker. We had to change the human's behavior to change the bird's behavior. Once she realized her error in rewarding the screaming, the person started to look for behaviors she desired and randomly walked over to give the bird a cracker when those behaviors occurred. In this case, the bird had a sound she particularly liked, so she gave a cracker every time the bird made the sound and stopped giving crackers for screaming. Soon the bird realized that screaming did not work, but the sound did, and the bird replaced screaming with the sound to get attention.

In your case, leaving the room elicits a scream. Make sure that you rotate your bird's toys and have new toys every few weeks. Birds become easily bored, and if you are working or going to school, you may not have the proper amount of time to spend with your bird. Puzzle toys are a great way to entertain a bird. These are

items that the bird has to work at getting treats out. Not only is this exercise for the body, but it is also exercise for the mind. An entertained bird is usually a quieter one. Have a toy ready to give to Petey when you leave the room.

Establish times that it is all right for your bird to let loose and vocalize to the world. I taught a very vocal Cockatoo to "Be a Too" on cue. She learned to vocalize when I said the cue and then learned to be quiet when I asked. To teach this you need to know what gets your bird started and also have something that interrupts the squawking (a hand waving above my head used to quiet her for a moment, so I clicked and treated quiet and then added a "Quiet" cue). Once you have an on/off switch to the noises an animal makes, it's easy to teach them when they can and can't make noise.

Nutrition is another important aspect in behavior modification. Many birds are fed only a seed diet, which means they are not getting the proper nutrients from needed fruits and vegetables. If the neurons aren't healthy then they can't communicate properly with the body. What goes in is what you get out of your animal, so make sure to always feed a proper nutritious diet. There are pellet foods which are formulated to give a bird a well-rounded diet, but there really isn't any replacement to fresh fruits and vegetables as well as fresh seeds and grains. Store bought seeds rarely contain the nutrition needed for a healthy bird and many are preserved with dangerous chemicals such as ethoxyquin. Check your food labels and see exactly what you are giving your bird. I've seen amazing changes in birds' attitudes and overall health - shiny feathers, clearer eyes, less noise, better behavior - just by a change in diet.

Animals make noise to communicate with us, not to be bad. If your animal is making excess noise, evaluate what is going on. Chances are a change in your behavior can help make a change in your animal's behavior. Make sure you're animal lives in a stimulating environment and that you are not rewarding unwanted behavior. Watch for desired behaviors and click the moment they happen then give a treat. Soon you will have an animal that presents all sorts of wonderful behaviors instead of negative ones to elicit your attention. Just remember the old behavior will probably increase before it goes away, so don't give up. Patience and consistency is always the key to successful behavior modification.

Send your questions and stories to:

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The Canine Café at Happy Tails

Want to learn more about how to deal with your dog's issues? Cheryl is holding Canine Café the first and third Thursday of every month at 10 a.m. at Happy Tails. This is a FREE hour session where you are welcome to bring your dog, socialize with other dog lovers, and ask Cheryl any questions you may have. Cheryl will also start teaching classes on Friday evenings at Happy Tails. Check out the schedule and types of classes at www.centerhillschool.com or stop by Happy Tails on Turkey's Trail. Classes are only \$60 to make them more affordable during these tough economic times.



Cheryl Falkenbury has been helping people solve animal behavior problems for over 20 years. Remember: you don't have to get rid of the animal, just get rid of the animal behavior problems.

Caring for Creatures Pet of the Week

Marshall



Thank heavens Marshall easily adapts to new places! Apparently found as a stray and taken to a local vet clinic before being transferred to the SPCA, he probably had no idea where home was.

Marshall is now at Caring For Creatures since February of this year and is quickly learning what a real home feels like. It feels warm and secure with loving people and regular meals, fresh water and medical care when necessary. This is what Marshall has now and this is what he is looking for in a forever home.

Having a reputation at the sanctuary of a love bug, Marshall will acclimate to a new household with relative ease. He is known to forgo his food and treats in favor of the company of humans.

Marshall is a 4-year-old beagle with a lovable personality. He has been neutered and is up to date on vaccines. He would be happy to meet you and he is sure the feeling will be mutual.

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