

Aggression: Reduction by Adjusting Expectations
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Introduction:

Aggression and aggressive behaviors are common subjects of conversations that occur whenever bird trainers gather to discuss their shows and their collections. This presentation will examine one subject, a female augur buzzard (*Buteo augur*), the nature and triggers of the aggression, the attempts to reduce the unwanted aggressive behaviors, and the adjustments of expectations that lead to the bird becoming one of the most reliable cast members of the show.

Defining Aggression:

Before one can address any behavioral issue it is essential that the behavior, its antecedents, and consequences be understood by the trainer. With aggression the first step is to try to understand the actual behavior that is occurring and the motivation for the behavior.

According to Gall, Gall, and Borg (2003), constructs such as “aggression” are not behaviors. They describe what the trainer believes the bird is thinking or feeling. Behavior on the other hand is what the bird does; it can be measured (Friedman, Martin, and Brinker). Since behavior is observable and is qualitatively observable it provides the trainer with good feedback as to whether the chosen training strategy is actually working. Constructs on the other hand are rather ethereal in nature; being the opinion of the trainer making the observation and lacking a methodology for recording them in a reliable qualitative manner.

As mentioned before the first step in developing a training strategy is to document the behavior one is trying to either increase or decrease, what will precede the behavior, and what will immediately follow it. In the case study presented here there were several behaviors noted. The most significant behavior noted was that when the bird landed on the trainers’ glove, or was picked up from a flight perch she was very “strong footed”. The bird would bind strongly to the glove when landing on it or reach out and grab the glove as it was presented for the bird to step onto.

A side issue with this same bird was in the mews where she was free-lofted, often flying at the trainer when they entered the mews.

The Case Study Subject:

The subject of this case study is Prophet a female augur buzzard (*Buteo augur*). When flight training began Prophet was approaching ten months old. She had been manned and handled from the time she was received at about four months of age.

Prophet's Aggression:

Several behaviors were noted during initial flight training period while Prophet was still on a creance. First, in the mews where she was free-lofted she would often fly at the trainer when they entered the mews. This was obviously a priority to address since it involved the safety of the trainer.

When Prophet was being flown from the glove to perches and back to the glove she would also bind to the glove very hard when she landed on it.

Finally, when the trainer would attempt to pick her up from the perch during a training session she would often lung at the glove as it was presented.

Show Requirements:

In the show our plan was to have Prophet fly from the speaker to an assistant, glove to glove, and to have the assistant move through the audience with Prophet making several passes over them.

Attempts to Reduce Aggressive Behaviors:

Given the behaviors that were observed the first step in the process of trying to reduce them was to attempt to find some common factor that might be the motivation for the behaviors. It was decided that while this evaluation and training program was being developed that Prophet would be tethered in her mews for the safety of the trainers.

Almost immediately after tethering Prophet there was a marked change in her behavior towards the trainer collecting her from her mews. She began to calmly step from the perch to the glove, almost without any kind of heavy foot contact and certainly without any lunging towards the glove. While the motivation for this change was difficult to understand it did permit us to move on to try and understand the behaviors during flight training that did not change after tethering her. This led us to believe that perhaps the heavy footed behaviors were food related.

During the months leading up to the start of Prophet's flight training she had been fed almost exclusively from or on the glove. While she was fed up she showed no particularly heavy footed actions while on the glove, in fact she had been calm and well behaved stepping to and from and also standing on the glove.

Whilst Prophet was still being flown on a creance her behavior was looking solid, probably solid enough to be flown free. However, before attempting this we decided to

raise her weight to see if that would reduce the unwanted heavy-footed behaviors.

Over the next week or so her weight was increased, the unwanted behaviors remained and showed no signs of reduction. Added to this the flight behaviors began to break down, latency increased, and several sessions were terminated early when Prophet failed to respond to cues.

Adjustment of Expectations:

The experience with the weight increase led us to think that perhaps flying Prophet in our show was just not going to work and that she should be fed up and used as a walk-on or a meet-and-greet bird.

This was a serious decision for us to make. Our show was new, we had very few birds and what we hoped would be our star opening act looked like she was about to become a “bit part” player.

Fortunately at this time we contacted a colleague and, as trainers do, we began swapping war stories about birds and their problems. During this conversation the idea of eliminating the glove from the show behavior as an alternative to eliminating the flight behavior was born.

Equipment Used:

In order to achieve our new training goal it became necessary to construct a new release/capture box and a stand to accommodate it. Since our show travels all of our show perches were constructed from PVC. A PVC stand was built onto which a crate could be fitted. A perch was placed just in front of the crate so that Prophet could come out of the crate onto the perch upon release and land on the perch to jump back into the crate on capture. Also, several tall PVC perches were constructed that could be used for Prophet to land on after flying over the audience.

Training the Behaviors:

Initially the stand for the crate was set up simply as a perch and one of the tall perches was set up just a few feet away from it. Prophet was placed on the crate stand, cued to the tall perch, and then cued back to the stand.

It took very little time, maybe two or three sessions before the tall perch was moved away from the stand to a distance of around 50 feet. Once Prophet was reliably flying on cue between the perches the open crate was placed onto the stand and with Prophet standing on the perch of the stand a small tidbit of food was tossed into the crate. It took almost no time at all before she was willingly jumping into the crate as soon as she was placed onto the stand, even without food in the crate. Once she was in the crate a trainer then cued her to the distant perch.

Still with the crate door not fitted Prophet was then cued from the distant perch onto the

perch in front of the crate. Once she was flying to the crate perch on cue without hesitation the trainer placed a tidbit of food behind the perch that was inside the crate, out of sight of Prophet. The flight to the stand and crate entry behavior was repeated until she was reliably flying out of the crate to the distant perch and then back into the crate when cued.

The final step in the behavior was to fit the door to the crate and close Prophet in it, releasing her after an increasing length of time. After her flights she was cued into the crate and the door closed.

The full show behavior was a flight/jump from the release box to the top of our stage backdrop, a flight over the audience to a perch A, return to a stage perch, fly over the audience to perch B, return to the stage perch, one more flight to perch A, and then one final flight from perch A into the capture box on the stage.

Results:

Our hypothesis that the unwanted behavior was food or food/glove related was borne out with the results that we saw. By eliminating all contact with food on the glove we were able to keep her safely in our show.

During training we still had an issue when Prophet was removed from the crate after a session. As the trainer would reach into the crate to recover her she would still lunge for the glove. We addressed this issue by not removing her from the crate for about 10 minutes, at this time she would calmly step onto the glove without any lunging.

We came to the conclusion that the food rewards were possibly triggering a raised level of adrenalin and that when she was allowed to rest after the flights she would become calm again.

In addition to becoming a really solid performer in our show in a wide range of venues Prophet is also the bird that we use for our meet and greet sessions after the show. A great advantage of not flying a bird from the glove is that they appear to bate less from the glove having been habituated to that rather than looking around for a cue to leave it.

Summary:

When attempting to address behavioral issues it is important to carefully observe the behavior and not to be distracted by guesses about a bird's emotional or psychological states. Behavior, its antecedents, and consequences are observable and measurable in a qualitative manner.

Be prepared to adjust your expectations and plans when training for show behaviors. Pay attention to all of the bird's behaviors and be sensitive to what these behaviors are telling you. You may either be setting up the bird to repeat the unwanted behaviors or possibly asking for a behavior that the bird is simply not capable of delivering.

Above all, keep an open mind; make adjustments not only to your training schedule and techniques but also if necessary to the behavior you are training.

References:

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