

A remarkable parrot and his companion

On a recent private trip to the UK, noted American scientist, Dr Joanna Burger, agreed to talk to **Dot Schwarz** about Tiko, the Red-lored Amazon who was the subject of **The Parrot who Owns Me - The Story of a Relationship**.

First published in 2001, this book (funny, touching and informative) quickly established a reputation as one of most original ever written about parrots and birds in general



Photographs: Joanna Burger

Tiko and Joanna

We talked in a friend's London flat. Joanna is a small woman with the most beguiling smile and, as you would imagine, a winning way with a strange bird. Within half an hour, my friend's pet Grey was on Joanna's knee, attempting to take off her rings.

"She is far more playful than Tiko," remarked Joanna. "You can tell the difference in the age of parrots; this bird is much more inquisitive. Tiko sits behind me, watching me work, and comes down only for preening." After all, Tiko is in his 50s and the Grey is only 4.

Like many people who later make a career out of studying birds, Joanna started young. Her father, a farmer in the Mohawk Valley, New York, began showing her birds' nests among the vegetable plants. This interest led to plenty of practice with rehabilitating injured birds. "Some survived for release back in the countryside and others didn't."

It wasn't a huge step to study biology in college. The route seemed laid out to become an academic, but one for whom field work has always been as important as staying in the ivory tower.

As Joanna's career progressed from PhD student through to full professor, the necessary books and papers were written along the way. Mostly they were scientific, but some were for the general public. With her ornithologist and physician husband, Michael Gochfeld, she wrote *Twenty-Five Nature Spectacles in New Jersey*.

So what made her change direction and write a book about a pet parrot? She wanted to reach people who would not read a nature book. Joanna says that "most scientists do a terrible job of explaining what they do." She feels that for many people, urban life has overcome an interest in nature - everything is concrete. "I wanted to bridge the divide.

Originally, I wrote about a gull, but I never published that one. I still have it somewhere."

Then she thought that she'd write about Tiko who'd already been living with her for 16 years. "I started after Christmas, meaning to write a short story. The first draft I wrote in a month; I got so interested that I couldn't stop and it got longer and longer and became a different kind of book."

It became a book that defies categories. Was it Science or Memoirs or Pets? In which section of the bookshop would it be shelved?

There are biographical memoirs about dogs and cats, but not about parrots. Many parrot books are either about training or husbandry. Irene Pepperberg published *The Alex Studies* in 1999, which gives detailed scientific proof of the African Grey Alex's cognitive abilities, and this work has helped change the way scientists classify birds' abilities. But it is not a book the average reader can read with ease. It is technical



Preening on the laptop

and scientific. Most of us who live with parrots want to understand why our parrots behave as they do. However, there are very few sources that explain parrot behavior, except as it relates to training. And often these books are not accessible if they're written in technical language, using a lot of scientific terms.

Training is not the same thing as understanding parrot behavior. To understand parrot behavior, it helps to study them in the wild and find behavior that is equivalent or related to what we see in captivity. Animals don't behave in a vacuum; their behavior has some relevance to their daily lives and to the factors that have affected their evolution. Behavior, like morphological features, evolved because it allowed the parrots to survive and reproduce more than did other parrots without a given behavior (or degree of that behavior). Thus, when a parrot does something in captivity, it has roots in the wild; we only have to find and understand those roots.

Joanna Burger has not abandoned her scientific training in her descriptions of her life with Tiko, but she has used a reader-friendly vocabulary free of scientific jargon. She has told readers exactly what it is like to take a difficult second-hand bird. *I formed a picture of the bird as a curmudgeon with clout, a strong-willed, cantankerous character down in the subtropical wilds of central Florida who lorded over a household consisting of two [old] dotting Jewish ladies and himself.* (p.29)

When, after one sister died, her ailing survivor could no longer care for Tiko,

who came to live with the daughter who just happened to be Joanna's next door neighbour. This relationship didn't work out. Tiko had bitten her ear years earlier, and with the best will in the world, they could not find a way to co-exist without Tiko being cage bound. Joanna agreed to take the crabby bird.

The shrivelling of Tiko's suspicion and the unfolding of his trust of Joanna and her husband Michael (more of that later) is as exciting as any whodunit.

And there was nothing one-sided about the relationship. Joanna writes:



Tiko perches amongst the manuscripts

Nor would it be extravagant to say that over the course of the first year Tiko subtly altered the direction of my career. He redirected my interests from pure science to that place where science and wildlife management intersect. I saw that my responsibility to him, the trust in which he held me, extended to all creatures and the planet as a whole. Tiko was my catalyst for this. I had been interested in preserving the coastal beaches of my beloved terns and skimmers; now I wanted to look at the ways we might preserve the habitat of animals around the world." (p. 123)

Can animals feel emotions?

Joanna told me that in the late 1800s-early 1900s, anthropomorphism was common - even explicit in stories and studies of animals. Birds and mammals were given human characteristics and names. By the 1940s, as behaviorism (or ethology) was emerging as a science, the new breed of ethologists went out of their way to avoid anthropomorphism at all costs. This was because naturalistic science was very descriptive, and seemed "unscientific" to much of the lay public, as well as other scientists. The behaviorists wanted to be more quantitative and experimental, and attributing any feelings to animals went out of style.

There is no way to test or show experimentally that the feelings of animals



Tiko and the teddies

are like ours. Joanna says, "There is still a tension about giving your study animals names." It has been a 'respectable' scientific opinion that animals can't feel emotion. With them all is instinct and innate behaviour. In ***Everything you wanted to know about birds but were afraid to ask***, Stephen Moss wrote: *Lots of creatures indulge in what can be described as 'play', 'courtship' or 'aggression', but we cannot suppose that when doing so they feel the same as we do - or even have the capacity to feel emotion at all.*

When Rockefeller University ethologist, Donald Griffin, published ***The Question of Animal Awareness*** in 1976, arguing that animals form concepts and have intentions, it was met with scepticism and derision by the mainstream scientists. The majority of pet owners wouldn't agree with the hard line view that animals don't have emotions, and scientists have partly come around. Joanna wrote on this question: *People familiar with parrots will understand*

that it is next to impossible not to develop a sense of what they think and feel. This presents behaviorists (of which I am one) with a dilemma. Our training drills into us an aversion to anthropomorphic judgments. I once considered it the epitome of bad science to attribute human thought, feelings, and language ability to animals. But over the years I have changed my mind. I have come to regard it as at least equally benighted to automatically assume that animals lack these qualities. I find myself amazed, in fact, that anyone could doubt that the animals closest to us - dogs, cats, horses, parrots (especially parrots) - have emotional responses to the things around them, or that anyone could question the proposition that they form ideas about the situations they find themselves in or the people they meet. No one who has lived with a parrot will for a second doubt that they have thoughts and feelings similar to ours.

However, anthropomorphism - attributing human emotions to other

species - can degenerate into cute whimsy or just plain inaccuracies. Joanna never commits either of these errors. Tiko remains a bird.

She writes: *Even though Tiko has spent his whole life in captivity, he is not domesticated. His temperament reflects many of the 353 species of parrots living in the wild, which range in size from the ten centimetre long Pygmy Parrot of New Guinea to the one metre Hyacinth Macaw of Brazil...* (p.69)

Tiko in love

Some readers might be squeamish about the graphic details of Tiko's wooing of Joanna. After five years living in the house, he decided that she was his mate and he courted her, finding nest sites in furniture and attacking her husband, Michael, if he approached her. That his ardour was never to be consummated had no dampening effect on his behaviour, which was repeated for several months during the mating season each year. Joanna never considered acquiring a second parrot. She believes that Tiko would not accept another bird, as he is very territorial about his space, indeed about the whole house. On the rare occasions when Joanna has had another bird in the house, wounded chicken, an injured kingfisher, and a pet Nanday Conure, Tiko has attacked them without hesitation.

Tiko shows compassion

It is a sadly well-documented fact that one of the ways to trap wild parrots is by tying a wounded bird to the ground and its flock mates will circle to try and comfort or free



it, and thus be trapped themselves. For Tiko, people comprise his flock.

Joanna describes poignantly Tiko's behaviour when she laid in bed for six weeks with Lyme fever caught on a field trip. He spent most of the time on her pillow, separating the strands of her hair. Michael had to feed him in her bedroom.

Since the book was published, Tiko has shown similar behaviour towards another member of his human flock.

Tiko always liked Michael's mother, Anne, and during her frequent visits would eat from her plate and preen her hair. When she was widowed in her early nineties, Anne came to live with Joanna and Michael. As she grew increasingly frail with heart disease, Tiko became her guardian. Tiko would not leave her side and tried to attack the hospice nurses who came to tend the dying woman.

The night she died, Tiko had to be shut away upstairs. Joanna said, "He couldn't have heard when she died, but he started making this awful noise. He was in a totally dark room. He never makes a sound at night. He screeched bloody murder. And then he spent weeks wandering around the house looking for her."

Tiko now

I brought up a criticism about Joanna's care of Tiko. He eats chocolate M&M's and will plead for them. Joanna laughed and

agreed that chocolate isn't good for birds or dogs either, and an M&M is a rare treat, but she says that Tiko has regular veterinary checks and tests and the vet says, 'If he looks this good at over 50, you must be doing something right. Most parrots are sedentary; Tiko, who is not clipped, flies all over the house. He seems really quite fine.'

Currently, Tiko is training Paula (the woman who takes care of him in Joanna's absence) to let him out of his room when she comes over to feed him. He watches out of the window for her, and when she comes upstairs to open the door, he flies directly toward her, up over her head, and to the banister in the hall (where he likes to sit). At first she ducked each time he did this, and this gave him enough time to fly out. Now, she has learned to step aside and let him fly out unobstructed. But once out, then he can go downstairs with her to



Portrait of Tiko



In the shower



On his usual rail

watch her get his meals, and he can converse with her.

Joanna says that people sometimes don't understand how complex the thinking of parrots really is. People who haven't read much, experienced parrots, or stopped to think about what they observe, may have trouble being part of a parrot's flock. Parrots make suitable pets for people who realise what commitment they are getting into; who are prepared to give them the attention and the freedom and the enrichment that they need. Parrots are not for everybody. In fact they are not for most people." Taking on a long-lived bird like a parrot is like having a strong-willed four year old in your home, forever."

Study and observation, Joanna believes, make it possible for carers to keep parrots happy in captivity.

She makes the connection between parrot owning and conservation. Having a parrot in the home makes people



The banister in the hall, where Tiko likes to sit

aware of the plight of parrots in the wild. She says, "You cannot preserve something you don't love or know about."

Unwanted Birds

Most people want to acquire a young bird, but Joanna urges us to consider adopting an older bird. They may take a bit longer to decide to trust you, and they need love and attention for many weeks or months before this happens, but the wait is worth it. They will adore you with the fierce determination of a second husband (or wife, if appropriate) who has decided that

he will make this relationship work. Adopted parrots know that it is well worth devoting time and energy to this new relationship. Gone is the naiveté of the young, the firm belief that love will last with little attention. In its place is the sure knowledge that love takes time, attention, and devotion. There is something to be said for the maturity that comes with knowing

something about the world, about abandonment, and death. There are a lot of parrots out there who have lost their families, either through death or life changes.

An Afterword

Sometimes Joanna has to leave home for an overnight stop and Tiko misses her. When her airport taxi drops her at home, Tiko is waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs.

"I don't know how he knew," Mike says, "but ten minutes before you walked through the door he opened his cage in the dark and flew to the banister, calling softly for you. I looked but there was no taxi outside."

.....How did he know when I was going to arrive? I have spent most of my life devoted to science. But in recent years my relationship to Tiko has begun to give me glimmers into another realm. There is so much we have yet to grasp about our connection to each other, and Tiko and I are joined in ways I don't begin to understand. (p. 240) ■



Enjoying a scratch while Joanna relaxes



In the kitchen

Books referred to in text

All quotes are from: *The Parrot Who Owns Me - The Story of a Relationship* - Joanna

Burger Sidgewick & Jackson 2001
The Alex Studies: Cognitive and Communicative Abilities of Grey Parrots - Irene Maxine Pepperberg, Harvard University Press. 2002.

The Question of Animal Awareness. Donald Griffin, Rockefeller University Press, 1976.