

TALKING BIRDS: LOQUACIOUS ONES ARE MALES

By AUSTIN L. RAND
CURATOR OF BIRDS

ONCE THERE WAS AN AUDITOR who, in a mood of economy, suggested that we replace telephone operators with monkeys to handle the receiver and connections and parrots to do the talking. This obviously impractical scheme I vetoed. Not that monkeys cannot be trained to do many things, for they can be. Colin C. Sanborn, Curator of Mammals, tells me that in Siam monkeys were used regularly on some coconut plantations to climb the palm trees and throw down the nuts for the harvest. Monkeys have also been used

be trained to do this, perhaps they have other latent capabilities.

BIRDS WITH LARGE VOCABULARIES

The birds present greater difficulties. Not that some can't learn to repeat human words, for they do. African gray parrots are usually considered the best talkers with the most human quality in their voices. The green Amazon parrots of Central and South America are also highly regarded as talkers. With the recent wave of popularity of the budgerigar or Australian shell parakeet in America we've become conscious of its ability to repeat words.

Karl Plath of Chicago's Brookfield Zoo tells me that he's heard a really good budgie called Blue Boy talk. It had a vocabulary of more than one hundred words (news-papers claim vocabularies of four hundred or more for some birds). Its pronunciation was good and it spoke in a strong human-like whisper with a child-like expression. Its repertoire included phrases like, "Hello, Mr. Tanner, how are you today?" and "What are you doing? Playing gin rummy?"

Yes, we'll play gin rummy."

Apparently males make better talkers than females, but some females do become accomplished talkers. It seems the important thing in getting a bird to talk is to keep it from other birds, tame it thoroughly, and repeat many times the words you want it to say. Once it has made a start and built up some vocabulary, it learns additional words quickly, and you can start on whole phrases, bits of nursery rhymes, lines of poetry, and whistled tunes. Not all birds are equally teachable, but neither are teachers equally good.

There's nothing in the Bible about parrots, nor in ancient Egyptian art. Parrots first appear in the literature of the western civilized world about a century before Aristotle. Their popularity has waxed and waned. One pinnacle of popularity was reached when large numbers were imported into ancient Rome to minister to the luxury of the age.

At present in the United States there has been a vogue for Australian shell parakeets or budgerigars. I've even seen them ad-

vertised in Chicago as TV birds, perhaps because they appeared on television shows but, it seemed to me, with the further implication that they would keep you company while you watched television. Also, a Chicago paper carried an account of a parakeet that got its education from television programs, where it picked up such phrases as, "Good-by now and God love you" and "Don't shoot, Ma'am."

The people of South America and of Africa probably kept parrots about their homes before Europeans knew the birds. According to Alfred Newton, when Humboldt was traveling in South America he saw a parrot that was reputed to speak an otherwise dead language of an extinct tribe of Indians who had taught their language to the parrot. Of course, parrots reputedly do live to a great age, and an authentic record of a parrot fifty years old was found in 1925 by Major S. S. Flower when he compiled age-records of animals. But a point that comes to the critical mind is that if none of the living people knew this language, how did they know the parrot was speaking it?

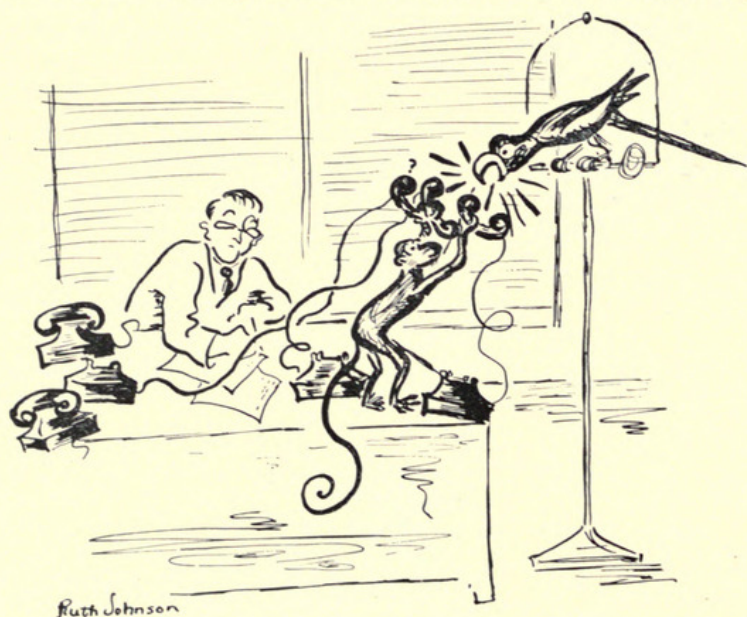
FLAIR FOR SPANISH

In El Salvador today the country people keep parrots. Some of the parrots are in cages, some are tethered to perches, and some are at half-liberty, with clipped wings and the freedom of a small tree in their yard. One of the El Salvador parrots is a green Amazon that talks well. Dr. A. J. van Rossem found that they learn Spanish much better than English. Many a human student has also found Spanish a relatively easy language to learn. Perhaps this is the reason, perhaps the Salvadorians are better teachers, or perhaps there is some obscure reason.

In Africa Dr. J. P. Chapin found that almost every settlement in the Upper Congo had a few African grays, and they're an article of commerce even now. Their value is such that parrot nesting-trees, whence are obtained the young, have owners. Incidentally, the tail feathers of the parrot are fashionable millinery on the Upper Congo. In earlier years when the trade in parrots was greater, Sir Frederick Jackson tells us that a part of Uganda provided many parrots. A hundred or more birds could be seen in the camp of a coastal-bound caravan, sitting on sticks in front of the tents and keeping up an incessant discordant chatter. Sir Frederick writes that at Fort Smith, Kikuyu, on one of the caravan routes, it was possible to recognize a Uganda caravan by the squawking of the parrots before it was seen.

Winter Visiting Hours

Winter visiting hours, 9 A.M. to 4 P.M., will go into effect at the Museum on October 15 and continue in effect until February 28.



to assist botanists in collecting plant specimens, and the following is from a BULLETIN account of fifteen years ago:

"The Kew Bulletin, No. 7, 1938, quotes from the Annual Report of the Director of Gardens, Straits Settlements, an account of the use made of berok monkeys (*Macacus nemestrina*), widely used in the East by the Malays for gathering coconuts, to collect botanical specimens from tall trees. Two young beroks, Jambul and Putch, are at present employed; they understand twelve words of Kelantanese and can thus be instructed to pick specific twigs, and drop them to the ground. Mr. E. J. H. Corner, Acting Director of the Gardens, who obtained the team from Kelantan, states, 'A berok upon the shoulder can be likened, in effect, to a falcon on the wrist; and its employment is recommended both to amateurs for its charm and cheapness, and to keepers of reserves where it is desirable to collect specimens repeatedly from the same trees without damage to them. Jambul and Putch are the first beroks to enter the government service.'"

I've traveled with a botanist in tropical forests and I've seen the trouble it is to get flowers from the treetops. Such simian help would be wonderful. If monkeys can

MUSEUM MEMBERS' NIGHT

Friday, October 8



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