

features

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My name is not Polly

ALIYA HOSEIN

IT is no secret that parrots can mimic their human care-givers and the many common sounds in their environment such as ringtones, car alarms and barking dogs. Although amusing and entertaining, perhaps you have wondered if vocal mimicry is actually useful to wild parrots? Studies have found that parrots do not mimic any other sounds in the wild. Instead they make their own sounds



TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO
FIELD NATURALISTS' CLUB

which primarily serve to maintain social cohesion between mates, family members and flock mates. This is particularly important to parrots, since they have a dynamic social system which means flocks continually break up and change. Imagine how much work would get done in our society if we were not able to 'mimic' each other's names.

The most common sound parrots make is the contact call between two individuals that have an established relationship and are interacting. Further, each parrot has a signature contact call that is used to identify

the particular individual. Yes, parrots have their own "names." The call may be given when they have been separated and cannot see each other, or when they have been separated for some time and then come back into contact such as when the male returns with food for his mate during the incubation period. This definitely comes in handy when you are trying to locate your mate who looks like everyone else. So how exactly do parrots get their birth names? Are young parrots born knowing their "names" or do mom and dad parrots teach them their "names"?

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FEATURES

Discussing family matters

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The adorable fit-in-your-pocket green-rumped parrotlet (*Forpus passerinus*) provided much-needed clarity on this question. Native to Trinidad but introduced to Tobago they are small green stocky parrots with short tails and is the only *Forpus* species with a green rump in both males and females. Males can be distinguished from females by their blue secondary wing feathers. Green-rumped parrotlets congregate in open or semi-open areas to feed on seeds on the ground or standing grasses. They live in open-forests, scrublands and even urban areas where they nest in empty cavities, termite nests and hollow pipes or utility poles.

To find out how parrots get their “names” researchers rigged artificial nests made out of PVC with audio-visual cameras. Soon after laying, the eggs from nine pairs of nesting green-rumped parrotlets were swapped (foster nestlings). Eight pairs were allowed to remain with their own eggs (biological nestlings). The distances among the pairs were wide enough for them not to hear

each other.

After listening to countless hours of “cheet-it...cheet-it or chee-sup...chee-sup” from all the nests they found that parents had signature contact calls that were more similar to each other than other parent pairs. Parents began vocalising before the nestlings started calling. Soon after, the nestlings became familiar with their parents’ calls and would respond by opening their eyes or bobbing their heads. Interestingly this indicates that all nestlings, biological or foster, adopted contact calls vocalised to them by their parents during the first weeks of their lives and not the other way around. Nestling siblings had stronger similarities among their signature contact call structures than with their parents.

Altogether these findings indicate that nestling parrots are given “names” by their parents and they learn their “names” through social interaction rather than biological inheritance. It takes about a month for them to learn and properly make their signature contact calls. By this time they are ready to leave the nest. Vocal recognition is probably important for restricting parental care

to one’s own after parrot families begin moving to communal foraging and roosting sites.

Now consider how we use names. Instead of just saying “I’m Tracey” or “I’m Akilah” we can say “Hi, Akilah. Want to have breakfast?” Besides learning their own “names” parrots also learn the “names” of their brothers, sisters

and parents and use them in conversation with each other as in “Cheet-cheet-it, is that you?” The parrot grabs the attention of another parrot when it imitates that parrot’s “name” and this allows for more exchanges of information. It is unknown if parrots can identify family members after years of separation or if they

truly have a concept of individuality. However, we do know that the annoying chattering in the trees is not all noise. Their chatter is possibly rich with plans for nest renovations, disagreements over where to roost, predator whereabouts and romance.

For more information on our natural environment, you can contact

the Trinidad and Tobago Field Naturalists Club at admin@tfnfnc.org or visit our website at www.tfnfnc.org and our Facebook or YouTube pages. The club’s next monthly meeting will be held on May 11, 2017 at St Mary’s College, Port-of-Spain. Lecture: “Is there more to the moriche palm?” by Linton Arneaud.



A group of green-rumped parrotlets
PHOTOS
BY LESTER JAMES



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