

Farm Fresh

The true story of a talking parakeet

By Jennifer



The hand-written sign above the cage in the bird store on Fillmore Street said "farm fresh." By that I understood that he was just a baby parakeet, and the juvenile's black-and-white stripes across his head attested to his youth. I took him home and named him Baker.

Baker was an Australian shell parakeet, also known as a budgerigar, or budgie for short. Many people through the years have expressed surprise that a budgie could learn to talk. A few have even

told me with certainty that budgies cannot be taught to talk. Baker would prove them very wrong.

Once he had settled in, I picked a short word—hello—for his first vocabulary lesson. For several weeks, he paid little attention as I said it slowly and clearly, over and over. After about six weeks, he began to express interest, flying to my shoulder when I started saying “hello.” Finally, when he was nearly five months old, I heard him practicing “hello” from the other room. When he was saying this first word clearly and often, I started on a more complicated phrase: “My name is Baker.” As soon as he recognized that this was something new to learn, he became very excited. He would fly to my finger and lean toward my face, quivering with anticipation. He liked to press his head against my lips as I spoke, and would give me a quick nip if I stopped. It took him just two weeks to learn this second sentence.

Through the months, Baker learned rapidly. His repertoire grew to include such sentences as: “Parakeets are very smart;” “Here, kitty, kitty,

kitty;" and "What are you doing?" Once he got the idea, he could master a phrase in a week or two.

As time went by, I began experimenting. Would it take him longer to master new words if I introduced several sentences at once? (No: He learned them all within a couple of weeks.) Would he react differently to learning words in a foreign language? (No: His vocabulary grew to include words in English, French and Italian.) Could he learn to sing a scale? (Only partially. We never got further than "do, re, fa, ti, do.") By the time he was 18 months old, Baker could say 50 words.

It became a challenge to think of new, more complex things for Baker to learn. Undaunted, he was able to master such sentences as: "Rubber baby buggy bumpers;" "Jennifer takes such good care of me," "Is it time to eat yet? I'm starving;" and my personal favorite, "Arthur Associates provides excellent consulting service."

Along the way, we had a few stumbles. Until the day he died, he persisted in saying "Merry Chr-

mist-mas" and I wondered who Chuck was when he said "How much wood would Chuck chuck if Chuck could chuck wood?" By the time he died at age 10, Baker's vocabulary stood at well over 125 individual words, in addition to a laugh, a cough and a wolf whistle.

While Baker will always be special to me, I do not believe that his ability or his accomplishments were remarkable. With patience and a hefty dose of persistence, anyone can teach a male parakeet to talk (the females are perversely unlikely to speak). I did not kid myself that he knew the meaning of anything he said. Nevertheless, it was delightful to enter a room and hear a little voice say "Hi, sweetie. I love you so much!"

