

Winged Wisecrackers Go Viral

When five parrots with a talent for colorful language join a zoo, they quickly become internet sensations. This tale delves into the unexpected challenges and delights of caring for nature's most candid comedians, whose sharp tongues have captivated audiences far and wide.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Recently, the Lincolnshire Wildlife Park in eastern England has had its hands full with a group of potty-mouthed African Gray parrots cussing up a storm at each other, zoo staff, and visitors to the park
- The birds, five of which were donated in 2020, and another three in 2024, picked up swearing from their owners; zoo officials were forced to isolate the parrots over concerns about young visitors hearing the foul language
- Ultimately, zoo staff decided to integrate the eight into the larger 92-bird flock, hoping more polite parrot talk and sound effects would rub off on the offenders
- It's likely Grays learn to cuss so easily because whenever humans swear, they tend to do it in the same tone and context, with no other words surrounding the expletives
- A 2012 study demonstrated that in addition to their mimicking skills, African Gray parrots can reason at the level of a 3-year-old child, however, low level interference can disrupt their use of this skill

Parrots are among my favorite creatures, and I recently came across a hilarious news headline: "British zoo has new plan to rehabilitate its potty-mouthed parrots."¹ Needless to say, I had to read on!

5 Potty-Mouthed Parrots From 5 Different Owners

It seems that back in 2020, five "foul-mouthed" African gray **parrots** — Eric, Jade, Elsie, Tyson, and Billy — were donated to the Lincolnshire Wildlife Park in eastern England by five different owners in a single week. The birds were quarantined together before being put on display for zoo visitors, and per CNN Travel, zoo staff "immediately noticed that the birds shared a propensity to fly off the handle."²

However, in short order zoo officials decided to put them on display, only to reverse course within days after the birds started swearing at visitors.

*"It just went ballistic, they were all swearing," the venue's chief executive Steve Nichols told CNN Travel. "We were a little concerned about the children. I get called a fat t**t every time I walk past," he added.*³

*"They literally, within a very short period of time, started swearing at each other. 'F**k off' is the most common one — it's a very easy one for them to learn," but it was apparently just one of many swear words in their vocabulary!*

As you might imagine, most of the parrots' zoo visitors enjoyed their talent:

"The visitors were giving them as much back as what they were giving to them," Nichols said.

However, concern for kiddos visiting the birds forced zoo staff to split them up and temporarily remove them from the park's public areas, with the hope their language would become more family friendly once they were separated.

A New Counterprogramming Strategy

Fast forward to January 2024, and the zoo received three more donated "cuss-happy" parrots — Eric, Captain, and Sheila. Throwing caution to the wind, staff decided to quickly integrate the three newcomers into the larger flock of 97 parrots, which now includes the original five scoundrels.

"When we came to move them, the language that came out of their carrying boxes was phenomenal, really bad. Not normal swear words, these were proper expletives," the long-suffering Nichols told CNN. "We've put eight really, really offensive, swearing parrots with 92 non-swearing ones."

The strategy, if successful, will mean the newly donated foul-mouthed birds learn "all the nice noises like microwaves and vehicles reversing" that the larger group of parrots favor. The risk, of course, is that the polite 92 instead pick up the expletives, in which case "it's going to turn into some adult aviary," says Nichols.

The integration of the first five birds into the flock was "mostly" successful. Per Nichols, they still swear once in a while, and then laugh, mimicking the usual response they receive to their foul language!

Parrots precisely imitate the sounds they hear, so hilariously, six of the potty mouths have men's voices, two have female voices, and "when they're all swearing it does sound really bad," says Nichols.

Zoo officials have installed large signs warning visitors about the parrots' language, but according to Nichols, they haven't received a single complaint.

Why Swearing Comes so Easily to Grays

African grays are highly social parrots, and researchers believe their intelligence is almost unparalleled in the animal kingdom, comparable to that of apes, whales, and dolphins. (More about this shortly.)

In terms of their ability to learn language, Nichols explains that expletives are particularly easy for the birds to mimic because when humans curse, it's almost always in the same tone and context, without any other words surrounding the swear word.

For now, zoo officials hope the potty-mouths will adopt the sounds of the flock and clean up their act.

"I've just left them up there and there's lots of noises, which is brilliant ... from squeaking gates to doors slamming, people laughing and mobile phones," Nichols tells CNN. "I'm hoping that's part of the settling-in period, but I don't think they will ever lose the swear because as soon as somebody swears, they'll be swearing as well."

African Grays Reason at the Level of 3-Year-Old Children

Over a decade ago, researchers learned that African gray parrots could find food rewards based not only on clues about where the food is, but also by making inferences based on an absence of clues.

The human ability to make logical inferences, in other words, to reason, is thought to be one of the foundations of intelligence. Scientists have tested many other species for their ability to use reason, but until a 2012 study by University of Vienna researchers, only apes seemed to possess the skill.

For the experiment, researchers shook boxes containing walnuts and empty boxes so the parrots could hear the sound the nuts made bouncing around in the boxes.

They varied the challenges by shaking both boxes or neither, just the empty box, or just the full one. The birds had to figure out not only that the noisy boxes contained food, but also that the lack of sound from one box meant the other box likely contained food. They had to pick the box with the walnuts to receive a treat.

The parrots were able to determine that a noisy box was a full box. But what really impressed the researchers was when presented with a box that made no sound when shaken, the birds consistently picked the other box. They seemed able to reason that it would contain food.

The study authors wrote: "Here, we report the first successful and instantaneous solution of the shaking task through logical inference by a non-ape species, the African gray parrot."⁴

This is a test human children can't complete successfully until about the age of three.

In order to ensure the birds weren't just avoiding the silent box rather than reasoning the food was in the noisy box, researchers varied their shaking styles and combinations of shaking and sound.

The study authors discovered that when they shook the boxes horizontally, the birds picked the right ones, but not when they were shaken vertically. This led them to conclude gray parrots possess reasoning skills, but their ability to use those skills depends on the absence of low-level interferences. According to lead study author Christian Schloegl:

*"The most important point is that higher intelligence is nothing that evolved only once. Comparable cognitive skills evolved several times in parallel in only distantly related species such as primates and birds."*⁵

Sources and References

¹ [CNN.com, January 23, 2024](#)

^{2,3} [CNN.com, September 29, 2020](#)

⁴ [Schloegl, C. et al. Proceedings of the Royal Society B, 22 October 2012, Volume 279, Issue 1745](#)

⁵ [LiveScience, August 7, 2012](#)
