Know your species, know your bird

HILDEGARD NIEMANN, a parrot behaviourist based in Germany, recently gave a presentation at Twycross Zoo to Parrot Society members. For the past seven years, she has helped hundreds of owners to retrain their parrots. Her aim is wherever possible to keep each bird in its home. “The sanctuaries are over-full,” she says, “I do my utmost to keep a bird with its owners.”

Parrots form a major component of her life. Her second husband, Rainer, edits two of Europe’s most successful monthly parrot magazines – WP-Magazin for hobbyists and Papageien for breeders and conservationists.

Parrots have not been genetically equipped for life in living rooms. And Hildegard strongly advocates studying the species your pet belongs to, with its particular characteristics. She agrees that behavioural science theories apply to all animals, but says we must take species difference into account. For example, a female cockatoo in the wild spends most of the year in a nest hole. So a pet cockatoo will need a box or hidey hole to be content.

You must know whether a bird comes from a monogamous or a polygamous species. A pet cockatoo that decides that one member of a polygamous pair is the chosen mate can defend that mate ferociously. Does your bird mate for life, like an Amazon, or is it less choosy, like a Corella? Now that her two daughters are older, she travels far from her home in Bretten to sort out problems between bird and carer. And her mix of positive reinforcement training and analysis of the environment usually proves successful.

She devises a training plan to modify behaviour using positive reinforcement, as well as enriching the birds’ environment. She does not believe in clipping unless it is essential to stop a bird attacking.

Parrots are sensitive to atmosphere, she says. “Problems are caused by illness, divorce or an unhappy marriage. I must show empathy for such situations. I need to analyse the human environment.” She finds out the family set-up, the living space for the humans as well as birds. Are other pets kept? She wouldn’t recommend a grey for a stressful home with small children, for example because this species is highly empathetic.

Her intervention can take from a single session to a relationship with bird and client that lasts more than a year. She has more than 400 clients in Germany and surrounding countries. Some she advises by email for a fee of €100 (£33) per month. She will also help her clients with telephone consultations. On her German website at www.papageien-training.de Hildegard will also answer email requests in English.

I asked Hildegard for a typical case history and she said that, when she examined their birdroom of a two young galahs that were plucking, she found humidity of 90 per cent. But galahs, who exist comfortably in Australian desert conditions, need 30-40 per cent. The birds also had no shelter to hide in and no opportunities for foraging. Once this was fixed, the birds’ feather condition improved within six months.

But not every consultation ends so well, she said. One client bought two young male blue-fronted Amazons that were “Darlings”. Hildegard advised positive reinforcement training before the onset of sexual maturity. The owner did not think it necessary. She asked Hildegard for her basic advice for parrot owners. She said: “We want a happy, interactive relationship with our parrots and we want them to get old. But parrots often die before they are 20 years old. They suffer from boredom as owners don’t have enough knowledge of the species they are keeping.

Parrots are not only pets, they are a part of our family. You’d never give a child away because it has some problems. You’d fight to help this child. Do the same for your bird!”

Dot Schwarz is an ardent parrot/parakeet keeper, especially interested in positive reinforcement.

Dot Schwarz’s Companion Parrots column appears in the second issue of the month. Don’t miss the next one in the September 9 issue.