

Conservation Hero >> Steve Martin

One of the best-known animal trainers in the world, Steve Martin has pioneered the art of training birds and animals through positive reinforcement. He has been a master falconer for over 40 years and a parrot trainer for more than 45.

Steve's training experience includes hundreds of species of birds and mammals. He is a Trustee with the World Parrot Trust, and served as a core team member of the California Condor Recovery Team and as a behaviour consultant for the Hawaiian Crow and Hawaiian Hawk conservation projects. He is also a founding member of the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators and has served as its President four different times. Steve spends about 3/4 of each year traveling around the world serving as a behaviour consultant. He has now worked at over 80 zoological facilities in over 15 countries.



Steve is known for his commitment to conservation and education. He has raised over \$1 million for conservation programmes through his company Natural Encounters, Inc. (NEI) and non-profit Natural Encounters Conservation Fund. Earth Day is an official holiday at NEI.

What first drew you to birds?

My father was the most important influence on my bird interest. He had pigeons when I was young, and I even have a photo of me holding one of my dad's pigeons when I was only 18 months old. I had a pet parakeet when I was 4 and by the time I was 10 I was raising parakeets and finches to sell to the local pet shop. By that time I was also an avid bird watcher spending hours each week in the fields in my backyard.

I marveled at the behaviour of birds and can vividly remember watching intently as so many local birds went through their forage behaviour and courtship displays. The pair of Kestrels that nested a block from my house completely captivated me. Then, when I was 16, I got a Kestrel from a falconer I met. After that, I was hooked on falconry. But, my passion for all types of birds continued to grow as my falconry activities allowed me to explore new areas and experience new birds.

When did you begin working with parrots?

I had companion parrots all my life, but in 1974 I met a trainer who did a show at Universal Studios in Los Angeles and got a job as a professional bird trainer. It was beyond a dream to be able to get paid to do what I loved. Two years later he sent me to the San Diego Wild Animal Park to set up a free-flight show with birds of prey and parrots. In 1980 I went off on my own to set up shows at other zoos.

Was conservation always a part of your educational programmes? When we opened the show in 1976 I knew I wanted people to know more about birds so that they would protect them.

But, I didn't know much about conservation or how to include it in our programme. I gradually learned more about how to structure our programme to create engaging experiences that carried subtle conservation/education messages. Rather than bombarding people with doom and gloom, I learned the value of positive and hopeful messages that inspire caring and conservation action.

Now, conservation is a part of all of our programmes. We use the entertainment of animals doing species-appropriate behaviour combined with close encounters for the guests as vehicles for our conservation/education messages. We try to help people understand how they make little changes in their lives that will help countless species in the wild.

When did your interest in conservation go to the next level?

In 1988 I talked to Ron Tilson, Director of Conservation at the Minnesota Zoo, about his work to protect Javan Rhinos at Ujung Kulong in Indonesia. I was impressed with the commitment to protect rhinos in their native habitat instead of trapping them in the wild and bringing them to zoos to try and breed them for future release. Protecting them in the wild helped the rhinos, but also helped the rest of the rare and endangered wildlife in the park.

I was so inspired that we raised money for the rhinos at our show at the State Fair of Texas that year. We made \$22,000 in 24 days and all of that money went to the Javan Rhino project. They used the money to buy a boat for the wardens to patrol the rivers and protect the rhinos from poachers. They also bought the wardens radios so they could communicate during their patrols. We still



support the Javan Rhino project through the International Rhino Foundation.

What made you decide to work with WPT? I met Mike Reynolds at a conference many years ago. I heard him talk about his passion for parrots. Through my conversations with Mike I saw hope for wild parrots through his commitment to save them from the poaching and other devastating pressures they faced. I became a member and began supporting the WPT with our donations to help their conservation efforts.

When the opportunity to acquire two groups of Blue-throated macaws came up, I was happy to build facilities and manage the birds. We set up four breeding pairs and have increased our number of B-t macaws to over 30 birds. Some of the birds we use in our shows to help tell the story of the Blue-throated Macaws, but most of the birds are kept in large flights to prepare for an eventual release back in their homeland of Bolivia.

What is the most challenging problem for companion parrots?

I believe parrots are one of the most challenging species a person can share their home with. They are incredibly beautiful and intelligent, but also very difficult to understand. The most significant challenge to companion parrots is in the misguided and poor understanding of their behaviour. Most

companion parrot owners have a very poor understanding of how to handle, manage and train their parrots. They often treat them like a dog or a cat expecting the bird should just like being a pet and should “comply with their commands.” Unfortunately, there are many behaviour pseudo-experts who promote dominance-based methods with parrots that may sound good to novice parrot owners, but usually lead to compromised relationships with their bird. When someone writes an article that says things like “You should be the flock leader,” or “Don’t let him get away with that,” so many companion parrot owners are quick to jump on the coercion bandwagon and do things with or to their parrots that hurt their relationship with them. The best way to create desirable behaviour with a parrot is through positive reinforcement, and there should be no compromise on this point.

What is the most rewarding aspect of your job?

I rarely think of it as a job. It’s too much fun! I have seen wild parrots in over 20 countries and trained some of the rarest, most interesting and majestic of all birds, like the Harpy Eagle, Palm Cockatoos and three species of Black Cockatoos, Keas, Pesquet’s Parrots, Blue-headed Macaws and more. It is also rewarding to be able to share my training knowledge with thousands of professional animal trainers and companion animal owners. But, best of all I get to give back to the creatures that have inspired and motivated me throughout my career.



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