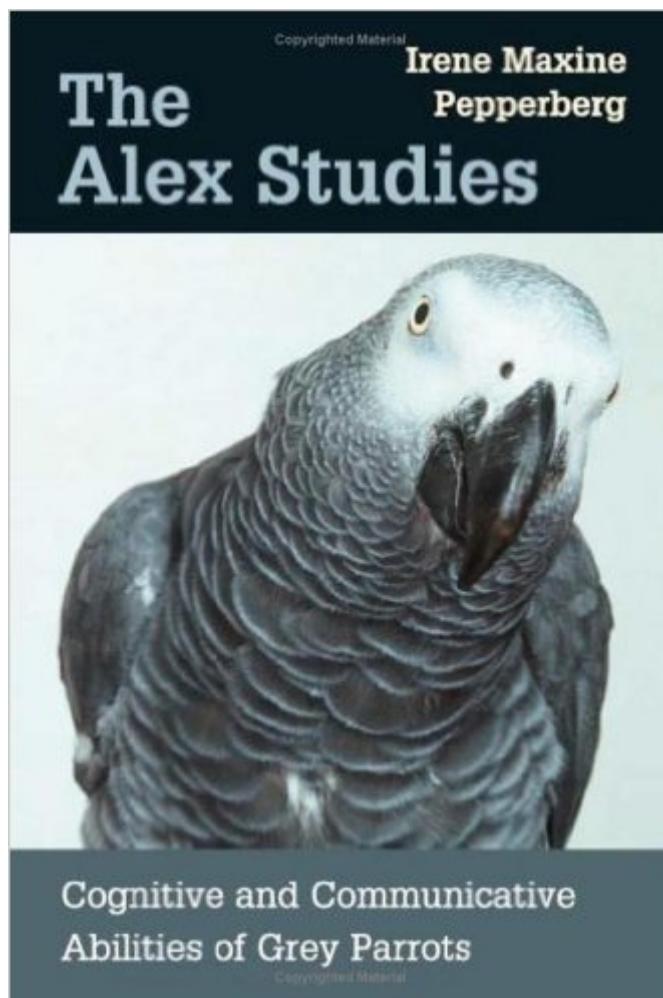


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The Alex Studies: Cognitive And Communicative Abilities Of Grey Parrots



Synopsis

Can a parrot understand complex concepts and mean what it says? Since the early 1900s, most studies on animal-human communication have focused on great apes and a few cetacean species. Birds were rarely used in similar studies on the grounds that they were merely talented mimics--that they were, after all, "birdbrains." Experiments performed primarily on pigeons in Skinner boxes demonstrated capacities inferior to those of mammals; these results were thought to reflect the capacities of all birds, despite evidence suggesting that species such as jays, crows, and parrots might be capable of more impressive cognitive feats. Twenty years ago Irene Pepperberg set out to discover whether the results of the pigeon studies necessarily meant that other birds--particularly the large-brained, highly social parrots--were incapable of mastering complex cognitive concepts and the rudiments of referential speech. Her investigation and the bird at its center--a male Grey parrot named Alex--have since become almost as well known as their primate equivalents and no less a subject of fierce debate in the field of animal cognition. This book represents the long-awaited synthesis of the studies constituting one of the landmark experiments in modern comparative psychology.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I can almost hear Irene Pepperberg saying that to us as she describes the significance of THE ALEX STUDIES. She herself offers a few humorous anecdotes about Alex, but for the most part there is definitely nothing funny about this book. It's written in a deliberately prosaic style for the

following reasons. The very tendency for the media and general public to treat Alex as simply the "talking parrot", when in reality his vocalizations represent something much more important in terms of animal cognition and communication. Also stemming from the fact that her findings about bird cognition are so significant, Pepperberg in making her case to scientific colleagues, writes with them in mind. She is incredibly detailed in describing her experiments and the controls used. This is in order to avoid the possibility of cueing and thus comparisons to "clever Hans"; she wants to remove the possibility of persons saying the evidence is that most dreaded scientific epithet - merely "anecdotal". The book is replete with references and Pepperberg places them in the body of her text instead of as footnotes. The book is not a smooth read and only a scientist could describe it as "a delightful and easy read" as ethologist Marc Bekoff says on the cover. This is not a popular science book. But equally it takes an evolutionary biologist and ornithologist to see the "groundbreaking" significance of the book as Bernd Heinrich does. Where does that leave us, the general reading public? If you take it in small pecks (couldn't resist one bird metaphor) you will be rewarded by some incredible insights into the cognitive powers of animals. We learn of abilities that scientists said perhaps (and that's a capital "P") resided only in Great Apes.

What can a bird learn? Irene Pepperberg set out to find out. As with children, the best way to assess what has been learnt is to ask. Primarily for that reason, she chose birds capable of forming human words. An African Grey parrot, who she dubbed Alex [Avian Learning EXperiment], became the subject of her investigations. Earlier efforts in laboratories were unsatisfactory. Why should Mynahs, reputedly excellent mimics, fail to learn speech in laboratory conditions? When in homes with several people providing input, they chatter endlessly, almost to distraction. The solution, Pepperberg decided, was the intense social environment. To that end, she developed a training method that produced astonishing results. This book thoroughly documents the author's methods and results, providing a fascinating account of the cognitive abilities of at least one psittacine species, the Grey Parrot. Incorporating a technique she calls M/R - for Model/Rival, Pepperberg would "teach" an assistant what she wished Alex to learn. The bird observed this, then was encouraged to emulate the learning experience. This meant the bird had to understand what was to be learned and use its innate abilities to achieve it. Speech was the first lessons, but things moved well beyond simple words quickly. Shapes, colours and materials were the next level, with Alex discriminating among them both singly and in groupings. The object was to understand what Alex could comprehend and act on. Alex also learned to differentiate - "larger", or "different" or, most significantly for a bird - "absence". He could note when something was missing, naming the

missing object. The method resulted in Alex's expressing his own needs and wants, even ending a training session by declaring he wished to quit.

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