

"Our partnership's based on trust and respect"

There are lots of ways to train horses but increasingly methods used with other species are having success with our equine friends. Bird behaviourist Greg Glendell explains how

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Looking out across Exmoor from Dunkery Beacon at the end of a glorious day, I gave my young Arab Harry a rub on the wither then gently asked him to make his way down the hillside. Our home for the night was to be a quiet field, me in my tent and Harry grazing before a well-earned sleep - like most of the stages of our trek together over Dartmoor and Exmoor, we'd covered around 20 miles that day.

As well as offering stunning panoramic views, our journey had seen us cross an army firing range straight after live exercises, traverse streams, cope with all kinds of traffic and negotiate rough moorland, all in soaring temperatures. Having enjoyed a few

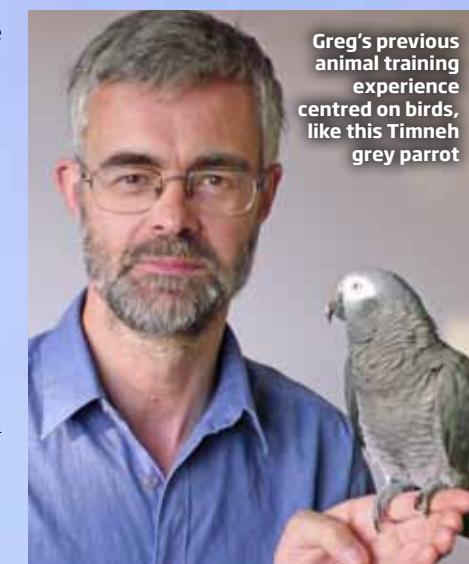
horseback camping trips in my 20s, with the help of my partner Rachel I'd planned my two-week trek with excitement. We plotted a route to keep Harry and I on country lanes and bridleways as much as possible and arranged campsites and food dumps for us along the way.

I'd known the journey would be a test of both myself and Harry, who as well as being ridden for much of the way would also carry all my gear, including tent, sleeping bag and cooking equipment. What made it all the more unique was the fact Harry was only 13 months into his ridden career, and had been trained by me, a recently returned rider with no experience in training horses, using methods I'd first learned about in my work as a bird behaviourist.

Returning to riding

Having previously worked in wildlife conservation, my love of animals and birds in particular made my career change to working with companion parrots a natural one. I love improving parrot welfare by helping owners resolve behavioural issues with their birds. I'd ridden quite a lot in my 20s and 30s but hadn't been around horses regularly for years until 2012, when a brief hack on a friend's horse reawakened my interest in riding.

I decided to take the plunge and get my own horse, and set my heart on an Arab, ideally a gelding with a few years' experience behind him. I really wanted to rehome an unwanted horse, but after months of unsuccessful searching I found an advert for a 15hh, un-backed four-year-old Crabbett Arabian called Harry. He was on Exmoor, not too far from my home near Cheddar in Somerset, so I went along



Greg's previous animal training experience centred on birds, like this Timneh grey parrot

to meet him. Harry struck me as friendly and very inquisitive, and I felt with time and training he'd be perfect, so he came home to join his new companion, a rescue pony called Dobbin. After settling in and vet checks to ensure he was sound, Harry was ready to start his education. I knew from the start we had a long way to go - Harry was very friendly, polite even, but he'd never been saddled or ridden.

"Harry struck me as friendly and very inquisitive"

I knew I was in at the deep end, so I sought help with the first steps of Harry's training. After attending various events and discussing training options with horse friends, I booked a trainer who used conventional traditional methods, including negative reinforcement during basic groundwork. After 10 minutes both Harry and I had had enough, and I asked the trainer to stop and leave. I felt I'd let Harry down.

Watching other people riding and training horses, the methods used sometimes seemed to consist of nothing more subtle than forcing horses to do things by subjecting them to uncomfortable or even painful actions. In my work as a bird behaviourist I'd become familiar with learning theory, the process of looking at how humans and animals learn, which is often used in training dogs,

Together, Harry and Greg covered 160 miles on their epic trek



Harry's first stage of training was recall work, using food rewards when he came on cue to Greg



Together Harry and Greg enjoyed many new experiences

cats and zoo animals. It seemed to me that horses - intelligent, sentient animals - were being denied such benign treatment and instead had to submit to their rider's aids. But what I wanted was Harry's willing co-operation, not his submission, and I realised I had to review everything to do with how I cared for him.

A new way to train

I threw myself into questioning everything, asking for objective scientific evidence for all advice offered. This led me to keep Harry barefoot, to use a Dr Cook's bitless bridle, and to seek information about more 'horse-friendly' methods of training.



Greg's research led him to choose a bitless bridle for Harry

Emma Lethbridge's *Knowing Your Horse* and Mark Hanson's *Revealing Your Hidden Horse* were books that really helped me.

Harry's training was based on positive reinforcement wherever possible, and only mild, brief negative reinforcement. Positive punishment was to be avoided at all costs - since horses have no moral concept of right and wrong, Harry would never be told off, rather I'd reward the behaviour I wanted using food, verbal praise and smoothing him on his withers and neck. If this didn't work, I used negative punishment by moving away from Harry so he was briefly unable to earn rewards from me (for more information on positive reinforcement, visit www.yourhorse.co.uk/learningtheory).

Learning theory teaches that during training you should avoid methods that cause excitement, so Harry was never forced to go near anything he found scary, or if he became over-excited, training stopped until he was calm again. I kept everything to his pace, which may have meant some things have taken longer than other methods, but this has helped produce a generally very calm horse.

Working with my horse

After training Harry to come to my call, we started in-hand walks around local lanes, gradually introducing heavier traffic and rewarding him for staying calm. Doing this before I ever rode him has been really valuable and Harry's

now very good in heavy traffic.

Food rewards also helped him accept wearing tack, and he was quick to understand the shift from directional aids given via his headcollar to those I gave using his bitless bridle. Preparing to back him seemed like a major challenge, but Harry's rapid progress and the fact he was still friendly and co-operative meant things felt positive.

"Our two week ride was a very special experience"

With the help of a friend I began getting Harry used to the feeling of me placing a foot in the stirrup or lying across his back, until I was able to get on him properly - for just a few seconds at first - and using rewards all the way. Once we were confident in walk and trot at home we began hacking, taking Dobbin on a leadrope for company at first.

Preparing for our trek

Using positive reinforcement, Harry mastered his fear of cyclists and learned to cope with noisy motorbikes and vans, until we were tackling hacks of 15-20 miles several times a week in preparation for our trip.

Our two-week ride was a very special experience that made me feel more in touch with the countryside. I'm convinced the best way to see our beautiful land is on horseback. Harry was incredible and I'm so proud of him. When you're with your horse day and night you can see he's more tuned in to you, and vice versa. By training him the way I have, there's a stronger bond between us, and it feels like we have a partnership based on trust and respect.

● Find out more about Greg's work at www.greg-parrots.co.uk



Greg loves to experience the countryside on horseback

"What I learned with whales has helped hundreds of horses"

It's not just parrot training that's got a lot to offer the horsey world. Shawna Karrasch began her animal training career working with marine mammals such as killer whales, dolphins and sea lions in the USA. She reveals how she discovered the target-based training methods she used with whales could also be put to use helping horses

As a child I spent time with horses on my grandfather's hobby farm, and even then I recognised that horses weren't coming running to be with humans, and that we were imposing ourselves on them.

I went on to study biology, and at university did a study on fin-backed whales in Mexico, which I loved. This got me thinking about a career working with marine mammals and eventually led to me spending 10 years training killer whales, sea lions, otters, dolphins and more. To be able to go into their world and have them be glad I was there was a privilege that really changed my life.

The power of the positive

All the training I did used positive reinforcement, and I found it fascinating learning more about the science behind this way of training. By taking something like a target, clicker or gesture, and using classic conditioning using food or praise to give that object value to the animal, you can use it to communicate with them, and be very precise in pinpointing the behaviour you want and rewarding them for it.

A trip to a grand prix show jumping event brought me back to horses - I saw happy horses and some less than happy horses, but I knew I had the tools to help them. I started to talk to horse trainers about my ideas but kept being told that it wouldn't work with horses. But I'd seen tigers, lion, hyenas, rhinos, bears, all trained this way and couldn't see why it wouldn't work for horses. I was still working with marine mammals at this point, but after meeting top US trainer John Madden and his show jumper wife



Shawna uses the positive reinforcement she learned working with whales to help horses



Shawna uses clicker training to help horses cope with new things

Beezie, I went to work with them, putting my training into practice with horses, learning how things fitted together and what worked best, eventually presenting my first ever clinic to the US equitation team!

Helping horses

By using positive reinforcement I saw horses change before my eyes - as they started to learn and become problem-solvers, they really blossomed and came to life, becoming bolder and more confident, liking humans more and become more focussed and often less spooky.

If you look at traditional methods, why would horses do anything for us? What's in it for your horse? But positive reinforcement, using something they value, gets them invested in the outcome of the training.

I don't judge anyone or what they do, it's just about education. People have no idea there's another way because it's not what they learned, and they don't realise they were hurting their horses and doing damage. This realisation can be hard on them but to see the changes that can come about is very reinforcing.

Years of childhood abuse gave me a huge amount of empathy, and it's through animals that I learned to trust again. They truly helped me heal, and now I feel it's my turn to give them something back. And positive reinforcement is positive for everyone.

● Find out more about Shawna at www.on-target-training.com



Shawna now uses her methods with all kinds of creatures