

# Love at First Nibble

Alex the African Grey, who, through Irene Pepperberg's remarkable and creative investigations, taught all of us so much about the "smartness" of parrots, was nicely eulogized in "Hope Is a Thing with Feathers" [Fall '07]. The remembrance, however, contained one statement I wish to amend: "Alex always perched by his trainer, clearly preferring her over others and certainly over strangers."

My wife and I had the privilege of visiting Alex in 2004 in his home in the Foster Animal Research Facility at Brandeis, at the invitation of one of his student trainers, Lara, who was taking a course with me at the time. Under the guidance of Lara, Alex enthusiastically showed us his ability to recognize objects ("key") and colors, and also to count. Then Lara remarked that Alex seemed to prefer men and seemed to like me, and that if I held out my hand "he might climb up onto your shoulder." He did, nuzzled my ear.

Subsequent events happened in moments. He began excitedly to parade

up and down my outstretched arm, bobbing his head, rocking from side to side, lifting one foot, then the other, making gentle squeaky "cooing" noises. Lara and my wife were laughing uncontrollably, but Lara managed to say, "He's trying to mate with you!"

She retrieved Alex and returned him to his perch. He was having none of that. He immediately returned to my arm, continued his display, and then, well, I think he attempted to mate with my shoulder. It was love at first nibble.

OK, he may not have been that smart, but through the patient efforts of persistent investigators like Dr. Pepperberg, he, as well as other creatures like individual crows, dolphins, and chimpanzees, have shown us that we humans are not the only smart animals on Earth. Alex was a remarkable bird; in the unity of nature, he was one of us.

—Chandler Fulton

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