

TRAINING THE IQ ZOO DUCK

The IQ ZOO duck is a rather special duck, not because of its breed -- usually the common white Pekin -- but because of the way it is raised. We have found that many animals do not become well adjusted to close contact with humans unless they are raised by people from a very early age and away from their own kind. The time period in the baby animal's life during which it must begin its life with the human, or with its own parent, is called by scientists the CRITICAL PERIOD; this period is different in various species of animals. In the Pekin duck, it takes place in the first week or ten days after hatching. In some other species, such as sea gulls and sheep, it may take place in the first day after hatching or birth. The process by which the infant becomes closely attached to a human, or its own parent, is called IMPRINTING.

Before we start to train an IQ ZOO duck, it must spend the first six to eight weeks of its life in close contact with a human. Usually we arrange this by asking school children to "adopt" the baby ducks for a few weeks. We give the children ducks just a few days old and ask the

children to play with the ducks, teach the ducks to follow them, just as the little duck would learn to follow the mother duck, and get the ducks used to seeing people and being handled by them.

After a few weeks of this type of human contact, the ducks begin their lessons at the IQ ZOO. The first step is to teach the young duck to eat from the electric feeder and to learn the meaning of the YES signal. An electric feeder is placed in a holding area; at regular intervals, the feeder makes the "clunking" sound which means that food is on the way. The duck soon learns that this CLUNK means food. And we go through the steps of teaching the duck that when that CLUNK sounds, it means YES to what the duck is doing at that time. Once the duck has learned what YES means, it is ready to begin one of its regular "classes."

The Drumming Duck

To beat the drum, the duck "dabbles" with its bill on a flat lever, or paddle, which operates the drumstick. Each time the duck depresses the paddle far enough, the drumstick strikes at the drum head and produces a resounding drum roll. The signal for the duck to start drumming is a small light which turns on near the paddle.

When the duck is first placed in the "classroom," it must learn the location of the electric feeder. If the duck is facing the drum, the feeder is directly behind the duck. It may take a few trials to teach the duck to turn completely around to get its food. Next, the trainer turns on the signal light and places a few bits of food on the paddle. Normally the duck will dabble at these, and usually in the process, will depress the paddle far enough to work the drum. The equipment is set so that the feeder will fire immediately if the duck depresses the paddle far enough just once. Sometimes the duck will be startled by this first drum beat. But usually, as it eats the food, the duck will calm down and be ready to try again. For a few trials, the trainer may have to put a bit of food on the paddle, but gradually the amount is reduced so that

after a few trials, the duck is dabbling on the bare paddle. Each dabble is rewarded that makes the drum beat so that it can be heard.

At this point, the duck must learn to DISCRIMINATE, as the psychologist says, or tell when the light is on by the drum paddle and when it is off. During early training stages, the light was on most of the time. Now the trainer turns the light off, and the duck must learn that it does no good to dabble on the drum paddle without the light. Beating the drum while the light is off does not work the electric feeder. Every few minutes the trainer turns on the light. Now if the duck dabbles on the paddle hard enough to beat the drum, it will receive a reward.

After the duck has learned to strike the paddle quickly with a good, hard stroke when the light comes on, the trainer now asks the duck to beat the drum more than once for each reward. The trainer starts by requiring the duck to beat the drum twice for each bit of food, and then quickly moves to a VARIABLE RATIO schedule, sometimes asking for two beats, sometimes for four, and sometimes for six, or only one beat for each food reward. Once the duck has built up good strong drum-beating responses on such a schedule, the last stage of training has been completed. It usually takes about one month to train a Drumming Duck.