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**MARYLAND ZOO IN BALTIMORE'S CHICKEN TRAINING PROGRAM  
IS NOT JUST FOR THE BIRDS**

*-Keepers use program to sharpen their skills for training different animals-*

**BALTIMORE (Nov. 10, 2005)** - Mike McClure, manager of The Maryland Zoo's elephant program, remembers clearly one of the first things that Richard Maguire advised him to do five years ago. "He said, 'You've got to go to Hot Springs, Arkansas, and learn how to train chickens,'" recalls McClure. "I laughed at him."

Richard Maguire happens to be one of the most accomplished and respected elephant trainers in the world. McClure hired him in 2000 to assess the Zoo's elephant training program and provide recommendations and instruction for improving it. Maguire wasn't kidding about the chickens. McClure soon found himself on a plane to Hot Springs.

More specifically, McClure was headed to Animal Behavior Enterprises, a legendary school for animal training founded in Hot Springs in 1943 by the equally legendary Marian Bailey and her first husband, Keller Breland. The Brelands were among the earliest disciples of "operant conditioning," a learning technique first described by the famed American behavioral psychologist B.F. Skinner.

Operant conditioning forms an association between a behavior and a consequence. It put in motion the idea that desirable behavior can be trained through positive reinforcement. The Brelands felt certain that operant conditioning could become the cornerstone of a new, more humane and scientific approach to animal training.

And so it was in the year 2000 that McClure found himself across the table from a few chickens in Hot Springs, ready to be put to the test as a trainer.

As it turns out, chickens are ideal training models. They learn quickly and respond directly to any stimulus given. It's not that they're brilliant; it's that they're very hard-wired. "You can work with a leopard or a chimp and they're of high enough intelligence to figure out what you want even if you're a fairly poor trainer. But the process will be slow and corrupted," explains McClure. "Chickens don't try to interpret what a trainer wants. They can't. They simply respond to stimulus – any stimulus. A chicken will reveal in its behavior every mistaken cue that you're giving it as a trainer. Only a highly skilled trainer can train a chicken successfully."

McClure arrived in Hot Springs already familiar with animal training concepts and practice, having been a zookeeper for more than 15 years. Nonetheless, the chickens helped him hone his skills. He returned to Baltimore, continued to work with Maguire, and soon began to see how well the Zoo's African elephants, Dolly and Anna, were responding to their revamped training program.

McClure decided to establish a chicken training course at the Zoo for other keepers. He knew that many would be interested because training is such an important part of animal care and enrichment in a zoo setting. Training enables keepers to shift animals more easily, provide medical care under the least stressful conditions possible, and form bonds of trust, respect and communication with the animals in their care. The Zoo's Curator of Birds entrusted McClure with seven chickens. He set up a living and training area for them in a vacant part of the Elephant Barn.

About 20 pairs of keepers have now completed the course at the Zoo. Keepers go through the course in pairs in order to observe and coach each other. Each keeper is assigned a pair of chickens and must train them to discriminate targets. One chicken must learn to discriminate between three colors and the other chicken must learn to discriminate between three shapes. If the chicken hits the right target, whether shape or color, the keeper clicks a manual clicker and then rewards the chicken with a food treat. The clicker is important because it "bridges" the time between the performance of the behavior and the delivery of the reward, thus allowing the animal to immediately associate the desirable behavior with a positive consequence.

What keepers find when they're taking the course is that training is as much a mechanical skill as a book-learned skill. "You have to learn how to move your body properly and how to coordinate what your mind is thinking with how your hand is clicking the clicker," explains Colleen Baird, an elephant keeper who took over teaching the course from McClure. "It's a practiced skill."

Keepers work with their chickens for ten days. At the end of that time, each chicken is put to the test. The shape or color that the chicken was trained on is removed. If the chicken refuses to hit any other target, the keeper passes the course. If the chicken hits another target, the keeper needs to work further with the chicken.

"The first day, you're throwing food everywhere and your timing is all over the place," says Julie Eder, an in-house graduate of the chicken training course. "Ten days later, you feel like you've really got it down. The course gave me a sense of confidence and control over the process of training that I didn't have before, even though I already knew a lot about training. And for keepers who come into the Zoo wanting to train but not knowing how, the course gives them the skills, not just book learned, but hands on. Anyone I tell, no matter what zoo they're from, they're just amazed and so impressed that we do this."

And what of the Elephant Barn chickens? They're giving so much to the Zoo. What do they get in return? "They have the best life ever," says Baird. "They get all kinds of fruit and worms and crickets. They get picked up and petted. They wander around inside the Barn and have a great outdoor coop too. They all get along well. Life is great."

### **About The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore**

Founded in 1876, The Maryland Zoo in Baltimore is the third oldest zoo in the United States and is internationally known for its contributions in conservation and research. More than 2,000 animals are represented in the zoo's varied natural habitat exhibits in areas such as the Maryland Wilderness, African Journey and the award-winning Children's Zoo. Situated in Druid Hill Park near downtown Baltimore, the zoo is fully accredited by the American Zoo and Aquarium Association. For more information, visit [www.marylandzoo.org](http://www.marylandzoo.org).

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