

“A Voice for Captive Prey Species”

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The roof vent clanks. The door creaks. The wind whistles. The dust blows. The chain link rattles. The drop pins falls. The footsteps stomp. The ears perk. The heart pounds. The muscles clench. The eyes peer. The shadow appears. The deer bolts.

This is the daily existence of a captive, stall dwelling prey species. It could be any species of deer, gazelle, or even a strong, powerful equid. In the wild, they are designed to vigilantly gauge the environment for danger. Their ears and eyes are always keen to movement and unfamiliar sounds. They graze and drink cautiously within the herd knowing there is safety in numbers but that no individual is safe.

What would it be like to live life in this constant state of fear? Aware that at any moment a mad dash across the savannah may be your only hope against a rapidly approaching cheetah. Think of it this way:

You have settled into bed for the night. Your spouse is in the shower. Your youngest is tucked in and your teen has just headed out to meet up with friends. Outside the air conditioning unit kicks on. There are rain drops tinkering off the window panes, remnants from the passing storm. As soon as you are about to doze off you hear a noise, slight but noticeable. You sit up in bed. The room is dark but your eyes quickly adjust. Your ears pick up on a familiar but unexpected sound—the clink of the front door deadbolt. Your heart races. Who is at the door at this hour? Do you reach for the phone? Do you alert your spouse? You ease your feet to the bedside right before you hear from the base of the steps: “Hey, mom and dad, I forgot my purse. Be back by midnight.” You breathe again, lie back down, and laugh at yourself.

Everyone knows this feeling - That pit in your stomach and tightening in your chest before panic sets in, your own instincts shouting at you to take action. What kept you from raising the alarm? A familiar voice—your own teen daughter. What could keep a deer from bolting into a fence? A familiar voice—you, their keeper.

Over time even the flightiest of animals will begin to associate their keeper with food. The simple act of dumping pelleted feed into a bowl builds trust. The animal may not come in closer, but it knows, in that moment, that it is not in any danger. With this in mind, any person should be able to provide a captive, wild animal its basic needs without causing it to panic and ultimately avoid the dashing, jumping, and crashing into walls. What about the other times, the other portions of the day, when you aren't feeding that section of the barn?

We know that when food is present a typical prey species is alert, but mostly calm. Comparatively, in the wild, the cheetah has made its kill and the rest of the herd can graze in relative safety. Dumping pellets into a bowl does not require any vocal action from the human, but what if a keeper simultaneously said, “Good morning, buddy?” The deer peeking from around the corner not only hears pellets in the bowl but it hears your presence, your voice and its tone. This association is priceless.

Now, not only does the frightened deer associate a human with food but it can recognize its keeper by the voice offering the food. A few days pass and the feeding routine remains the same. You enter the barn and prepare the feed cart. In the meantime, the deer that were peacefully resting in their bedding hay are standing and prepared to run outside as soon as that stall door moves. As the cart rolls down the aisle and you reach for the door latch you add to the normal sounds by saying: “Opening door.” The deer pauses for a moment before running out. That deer may just be thinking:

“Hey, that sounded like the person that gives me food.” He still runs outside, just in case, but he gave it a second thought.

A few more days pass, maybe even a week. One day the deer you’ve started communicating with by verbalizing “opening door” and “good morning, buddy” doesn’t run outside. He stands in his bedding hay, eyes bugged out, but not running for the hills. You open his stall door, dump his pellets, and continue feeding the other animals in the barn with the satisfaction of knowing that today you did not set off that particular animal’s panic alarm. Subsequently, the rest of the individuals anxiously listening and awaiting their turn don’t hear their stall neighbor scrambling for safety.

It gets even better. You may expect that it will always be in a deer’s nature to jump up whenever you enter the barn. Not true. Think of it this way:

The roof vent clanks. The wood creaks. The wind whistles. The dust blows. The chain link rattles. The drop pins falls. Before the footsteps stomp the deer hear: “Good morning, guys.” The shadow appears and it’s the keeper associated with the voice who gives them food. The deer remains lying restfully.

The deer had no need to jump up. Their eyes peered and their ears perked but they heard and saw you, their keeper, the one, if only, human being they’ve learned to trust. Your presence and tone of voice taught them that there was no need to panic, that you will do them no harm. The day you have walked the entire length of the barn without making a single deer clench a muscle is the day you’ve successfully done your job.

So we’ve established that you cannot only calm an animal during feeding times but anytime you are present in their barn. What about the other people who pass by their stall fronts, the occasional tour group or maintenance worker? As long as you alert the animal of this “new” threat it will reduce their level of fear. A large group may be overwhelming but they will pick up on your familiar voice within the chatty crowd. Eventually the trust you’ve built may even transfer over to the burly maintenance worker if he too reminds himself to greet the animals before entering the barn so they know he’s approaching.

Amazingly, even if, or shall we say when, a deer is frightened a familiar person can settle him or her down. Deer in total panic will do anything possible to get as far away from the source of the fear. This requires no thought on their part, only—run! The open grasslands they graze are vast and unconfined unlike the tight corners of cinder block stalls and chain link enclosures. In flight mode, it’s no wonder they end up smashing head-on into fences, leaping dangerous heights, and pacing endlessly. A simple, spoken “calm down” in a recognizable, reassuring tone can pull them out of that mental state for just a split second and make them reevaluate the environment and ultimately realize there is no real danger.

Once you’ve established a baseline of trust with a flighty, prey species the possibilities are endless. The newly calmed and more trusting animals that have learned your voice and tone can be trained to follow you onto a scale, shift into and out of a pasture, target to a Frisbee®, or even run through a Tamer®.

Have we broken the language barrier between humans and captive prey species? The answer is no, but animals do learn to understand tone and can associate familiar words with the action that follows. They can recognize voices and distinguish various sounds. Talk to your deer, your gazelles, and your equids. Tell them that you aren’t a cheetah coming out of the tall grasses. Comfort them with your voice. Give the animals you care for a better quality of life by eliminating needless injuries and minimizing stress. No captive, wild animal should have to live everyday in fear.



Tufted deer fawn and the author
(Photo Lisa Ware/Smithsonian National Zoo)



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