

Catching Escaped Pet Birds

by Denise Cabral
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My name is Denise Cabral. I am currently President of the Boston Society for Aviculture and Northeast Regional Vice President for AFA. Today I will be telling you about catching escaped birds, including how I got into this, preventing most escapes, my criteria for response, my most successful methods, and why I bother.

I got into recapturing pet birds during 1987, when in the course of answering telephone calls referred by the Massachusetts Audubon Society's toll-free environmental help line, I found I was fielding about 30 calls a year about escaped cage birds of one type or other. People were calling Audubon because, after all, they "know about birds". In fact, Audubon is not interested in providing information about pet birds, and so began sending callers to the officers of the Boston Society for Aviculture.

As a new mom, I had a fair amount of time on my hands, and I began using my background as both a wild-life biologist and a bird breeder to investigate the situation and develop ways to recapture non-native escapees. My first successful recaptures were in the fall of 1987, and since then, I've personally caught three to five birds a year, and assisted owners in 15 to 20 recoveries.

How do accidental escapes happen? There are people sitting *here* who walk outside with their beloved pets on their shoulders, mistakenly *sure* that their darling will never leave them. Well, maybe so, but my phone rings many times every year with someone in tears on the other end, because of a stray dog or cat, an engine backfire, a horn honking, a firecracker, or a gust of wind. If I had a pet I treasured that much, it would be always wing clipped, and even then I'd be super cautious about taking it outside without a cage or carrier around it. Two feathers and a good gust of wind is all it takes some birds to fly off. Until *you* can fly, don't take your bird outside. My guys get their sunbaths in secure cages, thank you. There are, of course, many forms of true accidents, like windows falling out, things breaking, etc., but there are also a lot of "careless accidents", too,

like forgetting your pet is on your shoulder and walking outside, leaving your pet out of its cage unsupervised and it chews through a window-screen, opening the door for ten minutes while you bring in the groceries, or putting the bird out for some sun in a cage that isn't wired together everywhere. As I've said, check those wing clips! If your pet escapes, don't give up. Stay with your bird as long as you can, and use the methods I'll describe.

As I developed strategies to help lost birds, I had to develop criteria for the level of my personal response. As I speak with a caller, I ask them if the bird is theirs. I rarely respond personally to a location where an owner has lost their own bird, because their chance of recapturing it is far greater than mine, even with my tricks. The bird knows them, and they live there, not miles away like I do. In cases where a caller has a "parrot" in their yard, I ask if they have a bird feeder (full of sunflower), try to get a rough identification of the birds, ask how long the bird has been coming around, and generally determine the willingness of the caller to help. If the bird is a parakeet, lovebird, cockatiel, or obviously competent conure, my chances of recapturing it are laughable, so I suggest a few easy to do things to the caller and express my willingness to talk again. In cases where the bird is larger, tame, relatively approachable, or returns to the area very regularly, I may be able to recapture the bird if the caller isn't interested in trying to. I will usually make one fully-equipped visit to the location to ID the bird and try to trap it. I must caution anyone who wants to try to trap lost or loose birds that you really need to screen out birds and callers that you can't help, and that you either need to charge a small fee to cover your expenses, or you need to get gas money from one of your local bird clubs. This can be an expensive and time-consuming project!

So how do I help owners get their beloved pets down from 60 feet up? First, I find out what kind of bird it is,

and if they can still see it. Again, small guys are harder to get back, and big ones are easier. If the bird is still in sight, I tell the owner to rush back out to it and keep calling it, until a helper can come back with a *picnic*! It may sound silly, but sitting down in a comfortable chair with a table full of your pet's favorite people food, that he likes to *share* with you, and eating right under his nose has proven to be nearly irresistible to escaped parrots. Almost every one of the tame parrots I've helped owners recover has been caught this way. The keys are that the bird's favorite person has to stay with it, and that person *has* to eat in front of it if the bird won't or can't seem to come down. You have to keep calling them, and showing them the food, and eating it. Having the bird's own cage and its mate or other bird companion outside, in a secured cage, of course, may also help. The picnic method may also work for tame birds that have left their home area. If the owner is calling me days or weeks after the escape and the bird isn't in sight, things are trickier. I first suggest that they plan to spend the next morning cruising around the area at 5:00 a.m. with the windows rolled down, listening for their bird. As part of their preparation for this, I suggest calling the police, if they haven't already, with a description of them, their car and license plate number, their bird *and its value*, and when they'll be driving around. I also suggest putting up 8 1/2 x 11 flyers all over the place, saying "LOST PARROT", giving a general description, their phone number, and offering a reward (don't specify how much). Lost ads in the local paper, with the same format, are also a good idea. Sometimes adding a sob story to the flyer or ad is a good idea, because there are people who will catch birds and refuse to give them back, because "you must have been an awful person to lose such a wonderful bird". It's people like this that make me wish we all kept photos, audio-tapes and written records of our pets, and that we were all careful to record what they say, little behavior quirks, physical marks, band numbers, etc., and that we all micro-chipped them, tattooed them, or at least taught them our name and address. It's pretty hard for a crumb to say it's not your bird when the bird clearly says, "I belong to Joan

Jones, 12 Main St., Avon." If a nice person calls you to say your pet is in their yard, most of the time you'll be able to camp out there until you get Paco back, if you ask nicely. Most homeowners are happy to sit back and watch the fun.

If you are trying to catch a non-tame bird, yours or a bird of unknown origin, you will probably need some special equipment. I have had the most success with a trap cage I built myself, holding a bait bird in the bottom and a bait plate in the top compartment. This trap is set off by hand-triggering a spring-loaded door on the top, and I caution users to slam the door only when the target is well inside, and facing away from the door. You don't want to slam the door on the bird's head. It's also important to tie a weight to the opposite side from the trigger, so you don't pull the trap over when you slam the door. Naturally, my bait birds are wing-clipped, the bird compartment is securely fastened, I don't take them out on cold or stormy days, and I *never* leave them alone. Trap cages of this design are very easy to build from 1/2" or 1" welded wire and cage clips. There's someone in nearly every bird club who knows how to make these things. It may also help to paint the wire dark grey, brown, or black, so it isn't shiny and threatening, and your bait can be more easily seen.

Another trap design that may be useful is a funnel trap, especially if your target bird is part of a flock. A well-designed funnel trap catches a lot of bird all at once. First you build the biggest wire box you can, as much as three feet wide, four feet long, and two feet tall, or even bigger. I usually make these out of the smallest mesh wire I have. Then you cut an access hole in one end, and close it off with a hinged door. At the other end, cut a hole about a foot around. Now cut a piece of wire big enough to make a funnel a foot around at one end, narrowing down to an adjustable small end 18 inches or so away. Birds enter the funnel to get to the strategically located bait pan, and they can't find the exit hole very easily. The secret to the trap is to adjust the funnel end to the size of your target bird so they can just squeeze in. This design works best in an enclosed yard, where the birds are used to coming to a feeder, which you've now emptied. If you

can't stay with this trap all the time, leave the access door open. It's kind of cruel to leave an animal in one of these traps for long.

Incidentally, if you're going to make a habit out of catching pet-type birds, you might want to make some discreet inquiries of your fish and game department as to whether your activities and traps are legal. In my state, you are allowed to trap (and kill) nuisance wildlife, and pet birds have no legal protection when they've escaped. However, one of the most effective bird-catching tools is the mist net, and you usually need Federal *and* State permits even to possess one, to prevent the likelihood of misuse. Too bad, in this case. So check with your authorities if you want to be a parrot-catcher.

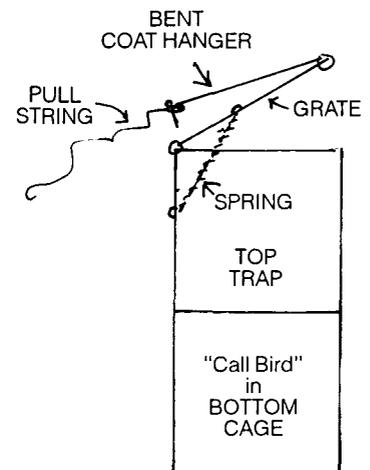
Another trap design that has worked is a simple nest box with a flap you can drop over the hole, using a string and pin design. This is useful for trapping parakeets and cockatiels, and might work for larger birds, too.

I've left the trickiest method for last, as it requires the most bird-handling skill. The first bird I ever recaptured was a Blue-fronted Amazon, who was feeding on the world's rottenest crabapples in a low tree. I took a 60 pound test, plastic-coated, wire, blue-fishing leader and attached one end to a six foot piece of genuine hay-baling wire. The other end was tied to the tip of a fishing rod, giving me a way to make a slip noose. The next time the Amazon stuck a foot full of crabapples in the air, she got lassooed, removed from the tree, and immediately wing-clipped. I also occasionally use nooses in a nastier way. If I'm after a particularly hard-to-trap bird, I will festoon my trap cage with nooses made of 80 pound test monofilament fishing line, in the hope that the escapee will land on the door or top of the trap and get caught by a toe or two. Constant attention to this kind of setup is an absolute necessity. Birds can lose toes if they're noosed too long, so be careful. You can also attach nooses to a trash-can lid full of seed or water, but again, you *must* stay with the trap, and you have to pick it up when you leave.

Why do I bother to trap escapees and counsel folks whose birds have escaped? My main reason is simple concern for the birds themselves. Parrots have a wonderful summer in New

England, but things get tough in November, and most die in January. There are quite a few accidental escapes here, but there are also a disturbing number of deliberate releases, some malicious, some uncaring, some in the ignorant belief that the birds are "better off flying free". I feel very badly for these birds, who didn't ask to be let go to die in the cold. It makes me feel good to help at least a few. I also worry for political reasons, as bird possession could be further regulated if the powers that be decide parrots are threats to agriculture. My last reason for parrot-hunting is, just as that phrase would indicate, the thrill of the chase. For me, the absolute pure pleasure of slamming the trap door with a cockatoo, Amazon, or African Grey inside even beats finding a nestful of parrot chicks.

My last comment to you is that I feel every organized bird club should advertise at least twice a year, in widely circulated newspapers, that they can provide knowledgeable, caring homes for abused, unwanted, or abandoned birds, and then set up a system of foster homes and an adoption program to carry this idea through. Many clubs have found adoption programs to be a pain, and in truth, it takes special people to run them, but we are all in this because we love birds, and this program helps birds. If we had more programs like this in my state, I would be hearing about fewer escaped birds. Think about it, okay?



Materials:

One bird cage big enough for a lure bird to be comfortable
Enough 1" x 2" or 1/2" x 1/2" wire to build 5 sides of a cage the same size as above

A very stiff piece of grating for a door
 A fairly stiff spring 4 to 6 inches long
 A coathanger
 A pair of good wirecutters, aviation shears best
 Cage clips or heavy but bendable wire (I use haybale wire)
 Pliers
 A brick or four to five pound rock

Procedure:

1. Make a five sided box out of the wire, about the same dimensions as your bird cage, but deeper if possible. Fasten it together with cage clips or wire.

2. Cut a door in the top of the box, about 1" smaller than your grating. The smoother the edges, the better.

3. Hinge the grating to one side of the door opening, with a couple of loops of wire.

4. Fasten the wire box, door on top, to the top of the bird cage, so that no openings exist at the connection.

5. Put the spring on the grating, about two to three inches from the hinge. Fasten the other end of the spring to the trap, on the inside, with enough tension to hold the door shut, and to allow it to close fairly rapidly.

6. Cut a piece of coathanger long enough to fasten to the top of the open door and extend down to the cage plus two inches.

7. Fasten the coathanger to the top of the door, by bending, and bend the trigger wire to catch on the edge of the trap. (See diagram).

8. Fasten your trigger string at the bend of the trigger wire, with a knot and tape.

9. When ready to use, fasten the brick or rock to the opposite side of the cage from the trigger string, to offset your pull on the string, and keep the trap from moving as you trigger it.

10. When you use the trap, put a same-species or closely related species bird in the bottom cage. Put a clear dish full of sunflower seed, peanuts, crabapples, red apples, grapes, and other favorite munchies, on the floor of the top section.

11. Probably needless to say, retreat far enough not to scare your loose quarry, but not so far that your bird cannot be reached rapidly if there are problems.

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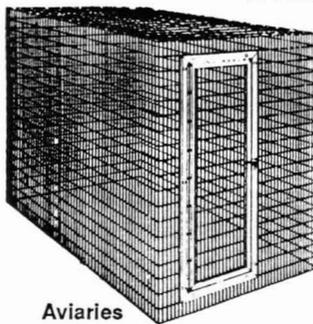
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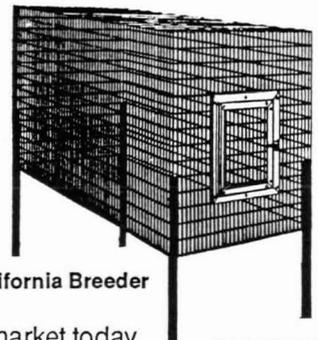
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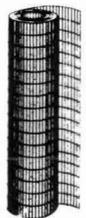
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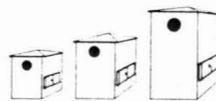


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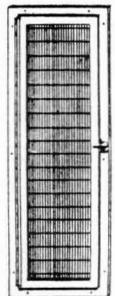
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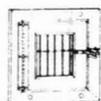
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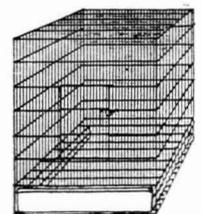
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