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Pirates'n Parrots

(or Free-flying Birds)

Stage II:
Behind the Scenes Training

by Chris Biro
Morton, Washington

[Editor's Note: Various federal, state, and local statutes may regulate the release of exotic birds in the U.S.A. Be sure to determine whether or not it is legal in your area before turning any birds loose. ed.]

It is a warm spring morning in March as Frisbee and his one-year older brother, Red Claw – both Mitred Conures – each dangle by a single foot from a tiny twig of a plum tree in the back yard. I watch them busily and playfully teasing each other until Frisbee drops from the tree leaving Red Claw in momentary victory. Frisbee falls only a few inches before thrusting out his wings and darting off across the yard. Red Claw immediately abandons his conquest of the plum tree to follow suit. He overtakes Frisbee before they reach the driveway and together and in a tight but twisting dynamic formation, they turn to circle the property at top speed. While Red Claw flies under the branches of a tree near a 6 x 6 x 21 foot cage housing a pair of Scarlet Macaws, Frisbee chooses to fly through the branches, slowing only slightly as he dodges to avoid poking out an eye on a twig swaying in the breeze. Moments later he does a barrel roll around Red Claw as they start on their third circle of the six-acre property near Morton, Washington.

Together they drop from an altitude of about 75 feet down to do a very fast low flyby past me as I stand in the yard watching their daily aerobatic display. They pass by only inches in front of my nose, passing so closely and at such high speed that I feel the air turbulence

on my face and hear the sound of the wind sifting through their feathers making a gently swishing sound as they streak past me and continue their flight. Four or five more passes around the property are made before they skillfully and lightly land in separate branches of a fir tree overlooking the "the big cage," a 8 x 16 x 24 foot cage, communally housing several varieties of cockatoos, macaws, and Amazons.

Thus is the life of Red Claw and Frisbee, with frequent variations of the same throughout the day. In the evening, as the sky begins to show signs of dusk, they anxiously wait for me to call them indoors for the night. Currently they are spending six to eight hours a day outdoors, four to five days a week. During the winter they only get out on days with no rain and usually only for a couple hours at a time.

This coming summer though, they will mostly be on the road doing state and county fairs as part of "The Pirate's Parrot Show" offered by ESENCE, an educational approach to entertainment with performing parrots. The two Mitred Conures will be joined by several other free-flying parrots, including veteran flyer, Janis, a seven-year-old Green-winged Macaw; Obee, a two-year-old Patagonian Conure; and rookies, Cosmo and Scooter, a Blue and Gold Macaw and a Sun Conure. Also part of the crew are several non-flight-ed birds for a display of more than 15 different parrot species – with an occasional pirate thrown in for flavor.

Most parrot owners can well imagine the potential dangers associated with free-flying; permanent loss during training, attacks by predators such as hawks, or disagreeable neighbors to name just a few. Often forgotten in the discussion are the dangers that face the clipped bird; permanent loss due to no training and little feather growth; being stepped on; injured or broken wings or feet due to falls; and boredom to the point of insanity again to name just a few. Obviously, it becomes a very personal decision to decide whether or not to free-fly your birds and many people will vehemently disagree with you no matter which choice you make.

The advantages of free-flying seem obvious to me, but in truth, it must be

experienced to truly comprehend it. The increased health through such joyful rigorous exercise can only be good for their bodies and their mental state. Often the free-flyers seem noticeably heavier and more robust than caged birds of similar species, even from the same parents. The difference in personality is quite simply beyond description.

One only needs to imagine living a few weeks confined to the bathroom versus being on safari to get a tiny glimpse of the difference in mental alertness and activity. This also can only have a positive effect on the birds. Anyone who has ever been around a fully-flighted Conure will most likely remember his or her happy and playful character over any other aspect. Even the famous loud vocalizations take on new meaning and to some degree become more easily acceptable. Effective "contact calls" are a significant part of the flighted bird's life.

My Mitreds, Sun, and Patagonian Conures are the light of my life. There is little that I'd rather do than to watch them playing outdoors. Granted, some of this is from "proud father syndrome" due to having watched them go from the egg (Mitreds and B&G) or from 6-8 weeks old (Patagonian, Sun, GW) to becoming fully flight-trained adults. Watching them grow toward and achieve their ultimate potential is quite an exhilarating experience!

I feel fully justified in my pride in their growth and achievements, not because of anything I have done, but because of how incredibly wonderful they have each turned out to be. There is something incredible, bordering inef-fable, about making the morning rounds when feeding the birds, and having two or three playful and curious little birds repeatedly landing on my shoulders, head, or food bucket. I sometimes get a feeling that is indescribable when I see them playfully dangling from a twig as I walk past them on my way to the next cage, only to have them drop and fly to the next twig to again dangle as I again walk past them toward the next cage; and then repeat until the feeding is finished. This free-flight experience has been one of the highlights of my life.

Though what I just described



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sounds like great fun, and it is more fun than I can express, it is something that also carries great responsibility. The subject of free-flying parrots is a very controversial one in the world of avian pets, and is justly so for many good reasons. Though I have come to believe that free-flight is the ultimate in pet parrot care, it is certainly *not* "right" for every person, every bird, and/or every circumstance.

In fact, more often than not, I recommend that people clip the wings of their birds. In most cases the people involved have enough trouble just feeding their birds a good healthy diet or giving the bird enough daily stimulus to keep it mentally healthy and rarely do these people see themselves as belonging in this category. The last thing their bird needs is for the owner to add the considerations of flight training to such a situation. To do so would most likely end in disaster, and unfortunately often does.

Most people of the Avian community do not have the right environment or level of experience needed to train a parrot to fly freely outdoors. Since it only takes one mistake to permanently lose a flighted parrot, I normally do not recommend that people attempt to train their pets to fly. However, many people will ignore this warning and venture into the world of keeping unclipped parrots. Most often these same people will not realize that there is a serious difference between the unclipped bird and the free-flight-trained bird.

The free-flight trained bird knows how to fly and come home, the unclipped bird usually does not. Flying is a natural behavior for parrots but it is also a learned behavior, just like walking is a natural but learned behavior of humans.

There are many important skills that must be learned – and learned in the proper sequence – if during the training process, the flighted bird is to remain part of the family and not become another tragic chapter of the lost pet story. The bird that lives in a cage, even if its wings are full, does not automatically understand such issues as lose-altitude-bleed-speed, landing site selection (not every

branch will support the birds weight), landmarks and navigation -- how to return home again, etc..

Often the beloved family housepet with unclipped wings is expected to learn all of these and other complicated issues in a sudden single "crash course." Likely, the bird's first flight experience comes as it flies out the open door or through the broken window the neighbor kid's baseball just came crashing through. Since its muscles are not accustomed to this kind of exercise, the lesson must be completed *very* quickly since the wings are already starting to get tired even as the bird first gets free from the house.

Everything is scary and new and the instinctual panic reaction of fly-up-to-safety kicks in. The bird gains more and more altitude, even as its wings are starting to get seriously tired. The bird gasps for air, as its lungs and cardiovascular system, in even worse shape, desperately work to keep up with the body's new sudden high demand for oxygen. The bird spots a tall tree and makes a desperate effort to land and rest. The "landing" is more like a crash followed by a desperate grab a hold of anything using claws, beak, and/or even wings.

The owner of the bird, if the owner can even see this tree, soon calls for the bird to return. Often the owner cannot understand why the bird does not return right away when called. Some even get angry at the bird, as if it is the bird's fault it never learned to fly or

come when called. Chances are the bird is sitting there thinking something to the effect of "Yeah, right! You think I am going to go through that again? No, no, no! You do your job and take care of me. After I've had a chance to rest a bit, you come up here and get me down! And don't you be adding anything spooky, like gloves, long sticks, poles, or ladders either! If you do, I'll likely get scared enough to fly to that even taller tree waaaaay over there."

It may sound like I am down on free-flight training, but I am certainly not. I am down on people keeping untrained birds with unclipped wings. This is a formula for certain disaster. Working in the public with our show, I have listened to many sad stories about how the unclipped parrot had lived in the house for several years until one day, someone came to visit, left the door open, and the bird was never seen again. To me, it is not possible to discuss the issue of free-flight training without making extra efforts to stress how important it is to either fully flight train the bird or clip the wings, but don't fail to do one or the other!

The obvious next question is, "How do you train a parrot to fly?" My first response is usually something like, "What do *you* know about flying that *you* can teach to a bird?" This stumps most people and the issue is usually dropped. Those who are really serious (the only ones I want to discuss this with anyway) will keep after me until I answer their question. So how does



Chris Biro, "The Pirate," making sure his Blue and Gold Macaw practises his free-flight skills regularly. Free-flying your birds requires exceptional skill and training – for you and the bird.

Photo courtesy of Chris Biro

one go about training a parrot for free-flight?

Essentially, I control the environment and conditions that the bird gets to do the learning in. The birds must figure out most of the mechanical skills (Phase I) for themselves; my job is to keep them safe and not lost while this miracle comes to pass.

Ok, there are a few specific social/behavioral skills I want to work on right away, like recall (come when called), but most of the mechanical skills of flight require the bird to learn through actual experiment and practice. There is really very little I can do to communicate techniques or methods even if I knew what to suggest to the bird. Most of what I do is focused on controlling the environment the bird will learn in, with respect to a particular set of skills not yet learned.

As an example, I attempt to do the training at the same age a bird in the wild would learn prior to weaning. Naturally, the bird cannot be weaned if it cannot get from the nest to the food source. To get to the food source it must first be able to fly. Of course this is another controversial issue being added, since this requires obtaining and feeding an unweaned baby. Again, this training program requires a certain high level of competence and experience!

I start the training as soon as I see the first "desperation flights" (as compared to "exploratory flights" which come later and with more confidence). We do the initial encouraging of flight indoors, starting with short hops to my arm and back again to the perch, adding distance only as the bird is ready. We thus create an indoor flight routine that can later, when the time is right, be recreated from the beginning while outdoors.

This young age and flight routine are the backbone of my training program. The age keeps the bird focused on remaining close to "mom" (me) and the flight routine gives us both a base of experience and thus confidence to continue with additional "training" and experience. Needless to say there is a great deal more to training flight than what is written in this article.

There are many factors to weigh before you decide to attempt to flight

train a bird. Some of these are: What age is the bird? Is there an easiest age to train at? Yes! What bad habits do we have to overcome – is the bird's history important? Sometimes. What species of bird is best for my own skill level – are some species of parrots more prone to panic flights than others or more nomadic in nature? Seems so. Is the bird comfortable in this training environment – are we moving too fast? Not good! How will this training effect my other birds and how will my other birds effect this training – do I have another flight-trained bird to help with the training? Very helpful. Have I chosen the best bird for my own skill level? What are my goals and objectives in this training? Am I ready to live with and care for a fully flight trained parrot? Do we live in a place suited for outdoor flying? There are many more questions.

Please do not think now that you have read this article that you are sufficiently trained and ready to tackle the flight training of your favorite parrot. Not only is there more to learn about the actual training process, but are you *certain* that you are truly ready to own a fully-flighted parrot? How long can a fully free-flight trained (and flight experienced) bird be left inside a tiny cage before it gets very annoyed and/or very frustrated? The free-flight-trained bird requires a new level of care, one that is very demanding and highly rewarding but also largely unexperienced in the Avian community.

Many aspects of parrot behavior will take on new meaning and challenge as you attempt to deal with a creature that can now easily avoid you at will and even just leave you as soon as it is loose. New higher levels of mutual trust, understanding, and patience must be sought out and maintained.

Many aspects of parrot ownership will be greatly altered and much of the "expert behaviorist" advice will no longer help you handle various problems with the very full-of-life flighted bird. Most of these "experts" have never owned or trained a flighted bird and thus are rarely capable of actually understanding your particular free-flight behavioral problems, let alone help you in your unique situation. Techniques developed with and for the somewhat

sedate (by comparison) clipped bird will often not work well with the more dynamic fully free-flight trained bird.

So where do you get help? If you dare to post your flight-related questions on your favorite Internet email list, you will most likely get royally flamed and roasted. I can assure you that the word "controversial" will take on new meaning for you as you search out information and other people who free-fly parrots – been there, done that.

In fact, in my own case, the controversy and roasting reached the point in April of 1999 that I started an Internet email list just for the discussion of Free-flight training and related topics. People with an interest in the Free-flight trained parrot and who can politely tolerate the discussion of such, of course, are welcome to join the list even if only to read and learn of the particular adventures of the few list members who are training and/or practicing free flying parrots.

Chris Biro

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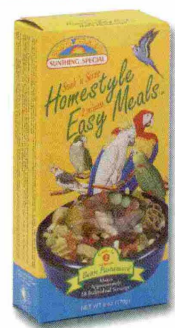
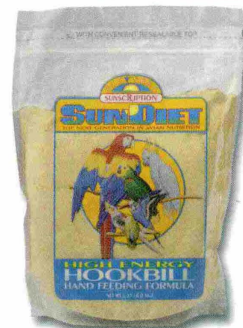
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