

Photo courtesy of Risa Teitler



Risa Teitler with a green winged macaw after nine weeks of intensive training. This was a completely wild bird.

Taming a Wild Macaw

by Risa Teitler, Professional Trainer
Miami Springs, Florida
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Taming a wild macaw takes time, dedication and organization. The adjustment of a wild bird into a domesticated, sociable pet cannot be accomplished in just a few days and in some cases may take a few months. The real job of taming is not completed until you have established a set of social behaviors in the macaw's outward activities. *Socialization* is the goal of taming a large parrot and encompasses much more than arm taming. Social behavior implies that the macaw can live contentedly in the human environment, which is far different from its natural environment.

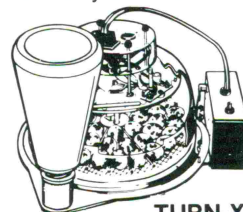
The mastery of certain basic social behaviors allows the wild-caught macaw, as well as the hand reared or domestic-hatched macaw, to integrate itself into the fabric of its immediate surroundings and to thrive in this setting. It should be the goal of every macaw keeper to assist the bird in making the transition that will enable it to be happy in the captive environment, no matter if the bird is to be a pet or an aviary inhabitant.

Acclimatization

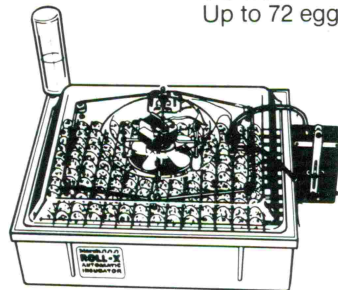
Before beginning the first lesson,

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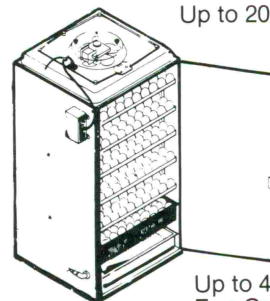
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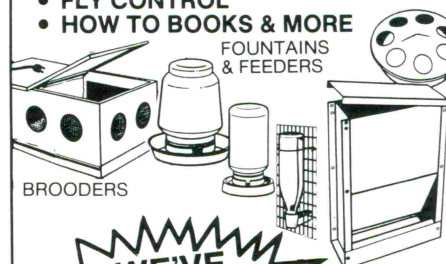
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you must be certain to acclimatize the new bird properly. You cannot train or tame a sick bird, and the period of acclimatization will allow the bird to adjust to changes in its diet, surroundings, and the new turn of events in its life. Diet and environment are very important in acclimatization. It is imperative to quarantine all new arrivals, keeping them entirely separate from any other birds that you may have. Resist the temptation to show off the new bird to friends until it has had the opportunity to settle down for two to three weeks. Place the cage in a well ventilated room. I prefer to keep just one bird in a cage during the acclimatization and taming. If you have purchased two macaws and plan to keep them in the same cage, it is still better to keep them apart during acclimatization and taming.

Feed a diet of seeds and grains, monkey chow, fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, nuts and fresh water with a vitamin supplement. Some birds may select just one or two items of the new diet and ignore the rest. Keep offering the full diet for, in many cases, it is necessary to teach the bird to consume a well balanced diet.

Throughout the acclimatization

period, visit the bird frequently. Approach the cage slowly, talk to the macaw, remain for a short time and leave quietly. One person only should approach the new bird at any given time; two people will make a nervous individual feel outnumbered. The acclimatization period is a time for the new bird to rediscover its self-confidence. A self-confident macaw will be easier to tame than a frightened one.

Be alert to the bird's food intake and the condition of the droppings. Smelly, loose, or badly off-color stool may be indicative of health problems. A sample of stool can be submitted to your avian veterinarian for laboratory analysis. Act quickly if you suspect a problem. It is advisable to have lab work run on any new bird, even if all appears fine. The stresses of taming combined with the unfamiliar diet and environment can affect a macaw's health. Preventive measures, such as submitting a fresh stool sample to your veterinarian for analysis, are recommended before the actual taming lessons begin.

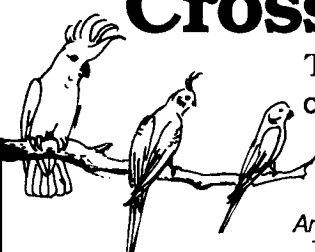
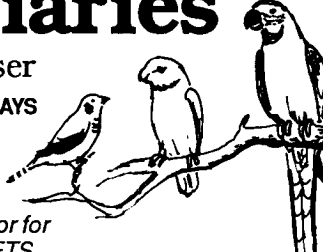
You can immediately start to assess the bird's personality from the moment it arrives. All new birds are frightened, jumpy and usually noisy.

They scream as you move them from the transport crate to the cage, and may turn on their backs assuming a defensive posture. Many macaws jump around the cage and scream if you just look at them, once they are out of the carrier. All of this is normal behavior and does not indicate you have purchased a vicious or untamable macaw. I have encountered few truly untrainable macaws, and even the most difficult can be taught the most basic behaviors, although an occasional bird resists taming no matter how persistent and motivated the trainer. Be assured, these high strung, wild-to-the-core macaws are few and far between. Most macaws adapt readily to living in human society, when given a secure home, good diet, sensible training program, and stimulating surroundings. What may appear to you as aggressive behavior is most likely a mock display to mask the fear the new bird is experiencing. Mock display often includes such behaviors as biting the perches, snapping the cage bars between the mandibles, lunging with the upper torso with feathers standing up on the head and neck. These displays of mock aggression are interesting and are intended to chase away adversaries. It is wise to give the newly acquired macaw time to adjust to you and the new surroundings before allowing it out of the cage. The mock display may cover up the bird's fear of you, but it is his real fear that will make him bite you. The more frightened the bird, the more serious his attempts to bite and injure you. As the acclimatization period progresses, the mock display will subside a bit and the bird's fear of the new situation will also be alleviated.

Developing a Taming Regimen

To develop a good training program you must first examine your daily routine. Plan to give the taming lessons on a regular basis, when you have the most free time. The decision to attempt the taming of a large macaw (or any parrot for that matter) means that you will consciously devote time to the bird in a formal learning situation every day. It is important to note that many beginning trainers make their task more difficult than necessary, because they develop an inconsistent approach to taming. I call this the "on-again-off-again" approach to taming. Although very motivated in their early attempts to handle the macaw, the beginners

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often lose interest if the bird does not progress quickly. The macaw may sit without benefit of any lessons for a solid week before the new trainer begins again, with new resolve to teach the bird basic behaviors. This inconsistent, on-and-off-again approach must be avoided at all costs, for it can contribute to a bird's acquisition of *avoidance* behaviors. If continued for a long period of time, these macaws can become almost untrainable, for once the avoidance behaviors are established, it becomes difficult for even the most ambitious trainer to work with the bird.

How Many Lessons — How Often

Try to conduct at least three lessons a day and more than that whenever possible. After a few lessons, you may discover your new macaw can be trusted to remain on an open stand for several minutes. If so, let the bird remain sitting on the open stand between lessons while you attend to other things. Never leave the student bird alone for long periods, keep constant surveillance and be prepared to retrieve the macaw if it jumps down from the stand. As taming progresses, you will be able to trust the bird to remain on the stand for longer periods of time.

The length of the actual lesson should be from 15 to 25 minutes, depending upon what the trainer and the bird can tolerate. If your student bird is very nervous, begin with a very short lesson of five minutes and no more. Between lessons, allow the bird to remain on the open bird stand. Continue to work in five-minute lessons and gradually increase the duration of actual work with the macaw until you are using up the full 25 minutes. *Do not work the bird into a frenzy.* End the lesson before the macaw becomes jittery, or you may establish a pattern of jittery behavior that will be hard to change later on; that is, the macaw will act jumpy whenever it wants to be left alone.

Always end the lesson when the bird is devoting its full attention to you. Once the bird loses interest, it is too late. Ending your lessons on a high note when the bird is performing correctly will establish a positive pattern of behavior that will carry on throughout the bird's life.

Next session we will discuss: taming equipment, the first lessons, establishing routines, arm taming and petting the macaw. ●

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