

# The Natural Choice



by Eb Cravens  
Santa Fe, New Mexico

## Let's Talk Wing Clips

A short while ago, a valued customer came into our shop in Santa Fe to have her pet Green-winged Macaw's wings trimmed. She told me a frightening story.

It seems she had been to visit a local veterinarian to request the same grooming service. While spreading her well-behaved macaw's wing for the simple task, he had advised her, "If I merely clip your pet's flight

owns a Yellow-naped Amazon, a Blue-fronted Amazon and an African Gray Parrot, was intelligent enough to realize the unsoundness of this advice and replied with a firm "no".

Yet, it was with frustration that I added this tale to my growing list of parrot grooming misdemeanors. The field of psittacine grooming is strewn with strong opinions, hazards and practices which border on the inhumane.

Take the common wing trim, for instance. In many cases, a baby bird still in the midst of its hand-feeding stage is clipped by the breeder or pet shop prior to sending it off with a new owner. Or, the instant a young fledgling takes off on its first wobbly crash flight out of the holding tub, the owner will rush to get the scissors and clip flight feathers for the baby's "safety."

Stop a moment and think what this means. A fledgling psittacine is denied his full wingspan during the earliest developmental stage of his normal bird behavior. Why, I have known ten-, twelve- or fifteen-year-old parrots which have *never* flown. Needless to say, they have not learned the more important lessons of landing, either!

Ever wonder why your hookbill pet walks everywhere? Wonder why he leans forward with "begging wings" to be picked up from only eight inches away? Wonder why you cannot get him off that out-of-reach perch or down from the tree he has climbed into?

He's terrified, that's why. Look to his fledgling training and you will likely

discover the answers. Early wing clip. No training.

Psittacine fledglings left with their full wing span will quickly learn control. Especially important are the weeks prior to weaning when baby fat is lost and an immense wing span to body mass ratio results. Full muscular development has not taken place; that comes with normal flight activity. (Incidentally, so does a voracious

Photo by Dale F. Thompson and George D. Dodge



One of nature's well designed flying machines . . . a Maximillian Pionus shows off his beautiful flight feathers.

feathers, they will grow out again shortly and it will cost you to have her retrimmed. I would recommend pulling out the flight feathers instead. That will effectively ground her."

Fortunately, our customer, who also

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appetite!)

These are the days our baby psittacines learn to hover in midair, looking around desperately for a safe spot to put down. They learn the quickness of decision necessary for the speed of being airborne. This is the time that babies perfect the art of "hop and flap" —the courage to jump into the air and the experience to throw out their wings and brake to a feet-first landing. That is the skill which rids a handfed psittacine of "begging wing" posture from eight inches away.

Don't run for the scissors after baby's first flight; run to the master bedroom for 20 minutes' training on a large, soft landing strip! Then follow it up with the baby's first introduction to a dirty glass window. Push his face against it, tap his beak against it, repeat "glass, glass, glass."

Ever see one of those "walking" parrots plummet off its perch and try to land the way it climbs, beak first? It is both sad and dangerous. Many a broken neck, bruised cere, or bloody breastbone occur each year in the parrot trade when birds who were never allowed to fledge grow their wings out and crash after taking flight.

Among all my clipped pets, the longer I allowed their wings to grow, the safer the birds actually were. Not only is their ease of flight and control increased, but they can escape from a danger or fly back to me when they wish. Train your handfed babies to fly to your arm on command before their first wing clip; it is a joy you will never forget and a lifetime skill that could save their lives!

Furthermore, the essential muscular development and exercise level of fledglings left with full wings until trained leads me to see little reason to treat a baby parrot otherwise. I often wonder if certain avicultural habits in America leave us in danger of raising a generation of flightless psittacines.

A case in point. I have a free-flying Sun Conure who is as fast and strong as his activity outdoors can make him. Two years ago, California aviculturist Dale Thompson and I took the opportunity to pair and breed "Kiwani" with a four-year-old female Sun Conure who was handfed, then kept all her life in a six-foot cage. After bonding and careful training, "Kaya" was last year given access to free flight with Kiwani.

It immediately became apparent that

she had neither the wing and breast strength to keep up with Kiwani, nor the tactical skill to land in trees from the wing. She would crash and flounder through foliage, finally coming to rest when she grabbed something rather than when she saw where she wished to perch. In fact, it took over two months before Kaya learned to fly to an upright tree trunk and "stick" — landing with claws on the vertical bark.

I know for a fact that pets who occasionally escape and fly away are not always wishing to go so far; they are merely scared to be airborne and come to rest in a treetop only when they crash into it and grab on for dear life! Train a fledgling to control his flight and he will like as not return to his owner when he is hungry or wishes to fly down, because he has the skill to do so without fear.

Such techniques as taking off from a whippy, swaying branch or dropping into the air from an upside down position may seem trivial but are, in fact, highly advanced for the ordinary parrot.

The implications in training for captive-reared psittacines being considered for wild release programs are immense. No parrot should ever be included in such a release until its sponsors are convinced it has the skill and stamina to perform tricky flight maneuvers without hesitation or tell-tale "panting."

In the case of the popular pet cockatiel, fledgling training is of the utmost importance. These hookbills are so very light and such swift flyers that crashing into walls and windows is common. A wing trim that safely limits them may be so short it leaves them to plummet helpless to the ground with a thud. Many of our cockatiel owners lament their pet's inability to fly without crashing. Yet, I have known unclipped cockatiels who could fly full speed indoors and turn on a dime. One of my babies, "Palila," a free flying lutino cockatiel in Hawaii, would go to the beach, play in the trees and come to her owner's shoulder when called.

To be sure, this is advanced training and not to be attempted by inexperienced pet owners. The point is, to learn control, a psittacine must have its wings. Once techniques are acquired, range and speed are controlled by a wing clip.

The finest U.S. breeders are now utilizing "fledging rooms," where baby parrots may group to learn flying in safety, whether they are destined to become pets or breeders. We also advocate that breeding facilities incorporate large flights in state-of-the-art housing so all parrots may exercise and stay fit during the non-breeding months.

Now we get down to the basics. I have seen many styles of wing trimming during my years in the psittacine trade. (I even came across a Yellow-headed Amazon with his tail cut short — to inhibit takeoff, the vet had advised.)

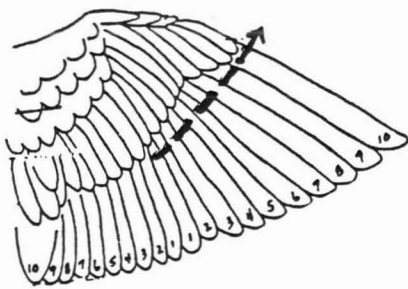
My choice is to clip wings for function, not for appearance. The decision to leave the first two or three primary feathers intact on a pet to obtain the crossed-wing look, in my opinion, defeats part of the purpose of my clip. This effectively leaves the strongest, thickest-ribbed, power flight feathers on your hookbill —the ones that drive it forward. A resulting clip must take more of the softer, fuller glide and landing feathers from the rear portion of the wing, cutting your bird's braking and cushioning potential.

Each of my clipped parrots has an exact feather count —equal on each wing —of cut feathers according to bird size, strength and how much flight I allow him. A good rule of thumb is the first four or five primaries clipped on each wing will prevent the pet from gaining altitude. To clip only the first three allows more range.

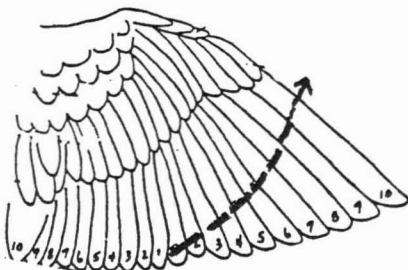
Even our macaw babies are taught to fledge and land with control, then are gradually trimmed back, starting with the top two primaries on each wing. A spry fledgling will lose 25% or so of its flight, but will normally gain much back quickly by means of extra flapping. (Thus his exercise and balance levels go up with the clip, not down!) Two weeks later, take one or two more primaries and watch his progress. It may be that four is enough.

Slim or fast flyers such as cockatiels or ringnecks mostly need five or six primaries cut. I have a Rainbow Lorikeet pet who needs the same.

Tani Smida, a conscientious breeder producing some of southern California's most well adjusted pet psittacines, offers these simple wing clip diagrams as a guideline to her babies' owners:



**Standard Wing Clip**



**Baby Clip**

Note that her innovative approach to baby clipping limits the speed and range of young fledglings without crippling their ability to land softly. "Always cut from the back of the wing to the front," she added, "and use a very sharp scissors."

Once you become familiar with your bird's performance, you will know exactly how many feathers to clip on each wing. It will be easy to see when one or two of these clipped feathers begin to grow back. Never clip a new feather until it has finished growing and is totally sealed off from its blood supply.

Remember that the greater the wing clip the less safe a parrot is to many approaching dangers. My birds are never so severely trimmed that they cannot move quickly to avoid an escaped dog, a slamming cupboard door or someone's unknowing foot-step.

We discourage the unequal clipping of one wing as it obviously throws off a parrot's balance and muscle thrust and can curtail a bird's desire to flap and exercise. Falls to a hookbill clipped this way can be sudden and injurious.

Where possible, we would like to see more parrot owners learning the procedure for clipping their own bird's wings. When done carefully with two persons and a towel to hold the parrot, a simple snip, snip, snip and a wing can be let loose with a "Wow! Paco, what was that?" Then turn the pet around and do the other

side.

For those pets which tend to hold a grudge after a clip, I remove them from their cage at night for a quick trim under a single lamp; then release them directly from the towel into the darkened cage, not to be handled or spoken to until morning. Usually, they react as if they did not realize what happened.

Some of the larger parrots brought to us for wing clipping become so traumatized by the journey and the strange handling that their hearts beat at a frantic rate, and they are panting for breath. Much better to have their owners learn the job, or have a wing clip house call.

Many cockatoos, for example, will allow a complete wing to be held out gently and one or two primaries cut. If ultra-sharp scissors are used and a sensitive feather never cut, the experience will not become fearsome.

Finally, I would note that for many years now I have given serious observation to wing clipping activity with pet African Gray Parrots. If there is a species common to the pet trade which clearly merits a label "emotionally sensitive", these sought after psittacines seem to qualify. Of course, grays' frequent tendency to feather pluck is well known to aviculturists. Less documented are grays' trembling nervousness and weak, jittery acrobatic skill when denied early fledgling training. In several cases, we have seen positive results with feather picking grays who are given back their flight feathers as part of therapy. Invariably, the plucked pet grays I have treated who are severely clipped turned out to be poor climbers with little self-confidence in their movements.

It is my belief that this adorable species needs extra training with baby wings to develop a complete range of alternative acrobatic skills prior to wing clipping. Under no circumstances should they receive drastic "all-to-nothing" wing clips; and serious thought should be given before owners decide to make them into harshly clipped or walking pets.

Let us all remember that to turn these winged creatures into flightless pets and breeders is unnatural at best. We, as aviculturists, have a responsibility to make our psittacines' lives without free flight as well adjusted as possible. ●



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\*'Dusty' the African Grey pictured.

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