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Obedience Training for Flighted Pet Parrots

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The decision to clip a bird's wings or keep it fully flighted can be a difficult one for many pet bird owners and vets to take. This article explains how to train companion birds to obey some basic flight commands, which can give you all the control needed for a flying bird.

Part 1: The advantages of maintaining flying birds

Unlike dogs, cats and most other pet mammals, parrots are not domesticated creatures, At best they are only one or two generations away from their wild counterparts whose days are spent flying around in their natural forest habitat: a habitat that could hardly be more different from conditions the birds find in our living rooms.

It is a basic tenet of good animal husbandry that captive animals be given the opportunity to carry out as many of their natural daily activities as they would in the wild. We may not be able to allow our birds exhibit all their wild type behaviors but the more they can perform their natural behaviours, the better these essentially wild birds will adapt to captivity. It is worth remembering that a bird's whole 'design' and biology are geared towards it being a highly active flying creature. With a normal body temperature around 42-43 degrees C, avian metabolism is around 60% higher than most mammals. This high metabolic rate is of course required for the demands of flight. As John Sparks and Tony Soper say in their excellent book 'Parrots; a Natural History', most parrots are "Ace aeronauts... having the capacity for sustained swift and powerful flight." Many wild parrots will cover hundreds of miles every week of their lives as part of their normal activities of Traveling between roosting sites feeding areas and their nests.

For any animal -including ourselves - to be properly fit and healthy requires us to take regular vigorous exercise. Most mammals can do this simply by running. Birds however, cannot get adequate aerobic exercise to put real demands on their heart, wing muscles and breathing abilities unless they can fly. Many parrots naturally have a heartbeat of around 1000 beats per minute while airborne and, unlike most mammals, they are designed to be able to sustain this level of activity as part of their normal means of getting about. In addition to the obvious health benefits of flight, birds also seem to enjoy flying. As grounded mammals ourselves, we tend to greatly underestimate the importance of flight to a bird.

Most parrot people would certainly like to keep their birds full-winged but often fear loss of control of a flying bird. However, it is not difficult to teach most companion parrots basic flight commands. In my experience working with many clients and their birds, I have found most full-winged birds remain as compliant as clipped birds, provided they are properly schooled in obedience.

I am often asked for advice on how to overcome aggression in flying parrots. Invariably though, so-called 'aggressive' birds have simply not been taught flight commands. Since birds use access to height and their abilities to fly to help assert their social status, if this goes unchecked, some object to accepting commands from their keepers. Many behaviourists still suggest having the bird's wings clipped. But this is no more subtle than keeping a dog chained up to restrict its movements and clipping can often cause more problems than it solves. So, in most cases, I simply suggest teaching flight commands (as explained below) before considering wing-

clipping. I often have four or five flying birds with me at the same time but without being trained in obedience and accepting commands from me, this would of course be hopeless. However, in most cases, basic obedience training allows you to have all the control you need of your bird.

Training your bird

Educated parrot owners are well aware of the need to train their pet birds in basic obedience, but even then most birds are only taught two commands (to step on and off the hand). It is of course important that birds are given the incentive to accept new requests from their owners and this is where positive reinforcement for desired behaviours is used. So, when a bird obeys a command from you, or even just tries to obey it, it is vital that you communicate your encouragement to the bird by rewarding it immediately with something you know it really likes. This can be verbal praise or having its head scratched or a favourite small food treat, or favourite toy etc. In addition to the basic 'step up/down' commands that companion birds need to be taught, all pet parrots (whether they can fly or not) should also be taught to refrain from walking onto the owner without 'permission' (see command "Stay" below). Since parrots are very intelligent, most are happy to learn many more commands in addition to step up and step down. The great advantage in working with parrots is the sheer speed with which they pick up new things. Unlike working with dogs, parrots can learn new things after a few hours or even a few minutes of training, provided they are given the incentive (rewards) as mentioned above. The commands I usually teach birds (or get owners to teach birds) are: 1. Step up 2. Step down 3. Stay. This does not mean 'stay where you are' but merely 'do not walk or fly to me for now.' 4. Go (leave me by flying from me) 5. Come here. Asks the bird to fly or walk to you. 6. Off there (leave your present perch by flying to another)

Using a Training Room

It is important to have a calm but confident demeanour when working with birds and the bird should also be calm in your company. It is often best to train bold or genuinely aggressive birds, initially, well away from their cage or cage room. It can be difficult to teach such birds new things while they are on the familiar 'territory' of their own cage or cage-room; so a training room is usually recommended.

The training room should be fairly small and unfamiliar to the bird: a spare bedroom usually works well. This should be carpeted and sparsely furnished with a couple of chairs placed away from the walls so that you can walk around them. Any large-pane windows should have net curtains hung at them to prevent the bird flying into the glass. There should be no mirrors or ceiling fans in the room. You should ensure there are absolutely no places in the room that the bird can land on that are higher than your shoulder. Keep the door closed throughout the training session. Training sessions should not last more than 4 minutes and the commands should be taught in the order suggested below.

Teaching the Commands

In general, to maintain obedience, parrots should be carried while perched on the hand not on the arm or shoulder. Shoulder birds often object to being trained until the owner controls access to the shoulder. To teach the flight commands mentioned above, the bird should first be reasonably proficient at flying, either because it is properly fledged or has re-grown new flight feathers following an earlier wing-clip. The bird should also be tame, not at all afraid of you.

Training sessions should not last more than 4 minutes and the commands should be taught in the order suggested below. Compliance and good behaviour should be rewarded with whatever you know your bird really likes. Where the bird appears to like having its head scratched, you can use this as a reward; i.e. it is only given as a reward, not merely gratuitously. Most pet parrot owners are familiar with teaching step up/step down commands (numbers 1 and 2 above) so let's start with the new commands; they should be taught in the order given.

The Commands

Number 3: Stay and Don't fly to me.

This 'Stay' command is not intended to mean that the bird should stay where it is; but to mean 'Don't come onto me for now'. This command is taught by giving the bird a stop signal with your hand held up, palm towards the bird (as though you were stopping traffic) while you say "Stay." The bird should learn that this means it cannot step onto you for the moment. Conversely, if the bird appears about to step onto your hand and you do want it to, then confirm this by saying "Step up" clearly.

Flying birds, bonded to their owner, will naturally be inclined to land on you, generally on your shoulder. This is fine on most occasions but the shoulder should be a landing place only. The bird should not be allowed to remain there at all. So always transfer the bird from your shoulder to your hand immediately, using the "Step up" command.

You also can use the "Stay" command to prevent the bird flying to you; for example when you want to leave the room without the bird. In this case, make eye contact with the bird, put your hand up in the 'stopping traffic' gesture and say "Stay." If the bird disobeys and flies towards you, keep your hand held up in front of it as it approaches and repeat the command to "Stay" while you prevent it from landing on you using your raised hand as a barrier. The bird will learn to turn around and land elsewhere. You should then praise the bird when it lands elsewhere, and then leave the room immediately closing the door behind you.

4. Go; fly off me.

This command tells the bird to fly from your hand whenever you don't want it on you. Initially, teach this command by standing with the bird on your hand, two or three feet from its cage or another very familiar perch. Turn your hand so that the bird is facing away from you. Then say "Go, go" and swing your hand firmly but gently in the direction of the cage or perch. The bird should leave you by flying. When it does, give the bird its due reward promptly for its compliance. When the bird is happy to do this from a few feet away, gradually increase the distance. Then, practise this command in other locations, encouraging the bird to land on other familiar perches and places until you can tell the bird to leave you wherever you happen to be. Make sure to reward all attempts at compliance very promptly.

Number 5. Come here.

This is simply a request to ask the bird to walk or fly to you. To teach this, reward any attempt, even a small attempt by the bird, at compliance. A visible offer of a food treat, or a favorite toy can often get a bird to fly to you, so use this to tempt him, and give your reward immediately. Gradually, over several days, increase the distance the bird is asked to walk or fly to you.

Number 6. Off there.

This is a safety command, used if ever the bird lands on any potentially dangerous perch such as any electrical device (TV or a light fitting etc.) or any banned high perch. It can be difficult to teach some birds this command, and it has to be taught when the opportunity arises. When the bird does land on such a 'banned perch' approach him and wave one hand at him in a gesture

unfamiliar to the bird, while saying "Off there." While teaching this command, you can also try waving an unfamiliar but harmless object such as a handkerchief near the bird. The bird should leave the perch and fly to another place, but not to you or any other person. If the bird attempts to land on you after having been told to leave a banned perch, use the "Stay" command to prevent this. Once the bird has been taught that a certain place is out of bounds, it must always be so. For safety reasons, the top of any door is also a banned perch.

The effect of teaching these commands to a flying bird often results in a much stronger bond developing between you and your bird.

Other Informal Commands

It is worth teaching your bird several other 'informal' commands; many people do this already, perhaps unaware of the fact that they are teaching commands. When offering a bird something such as a toy or some treat, approach the bird with your hand just below beak level (but not near its feet) and say "Take this." With new objects it is best to let the bird see you put these up to your mouth several times; this tells the bird the object is safe for him to touch.

Many people say "No" to stop all sorts of unwanted behaviour. If this is said in too dramatic a way, the bird may actually be stimulated to misbehave. A much less confrontational approach is more effective. I use the phrase "Be careful" spoken in a calm tone of voice to check some misbehaviour just before a bird is about to transgress. So if you see your bird about to do something, perhaps throw some valuable item on the floor, make eye contact and give the command in a firm but calm tone of voice. Initially, it is simply the bird hearing your voice which usually checks its behaviour.

Other Training Hints.

Make a point of carrying the bird on your hand, not your shoulder or arm. Reward the bird's compliance with staying on your hand by giving it plenty of verbal praise and some head scratching if it likes this. If the bird has the habit of walking up your arm onto your shoulder, you should ensure this is dispensed with. You can either use the "Stay" command (telling the bird to stay on your hand) or, tell the bird to "Step up" onto your other hand if it tries to walk along your arm. If you keep your elbow lower than your wrist while the bird is perched on your hand, this will reduce the bird's inclination to walk along your arm.

Safety of Flying Birds

All pet birds whether clipped or not, are subject to some dangers. Flying birds are just subjected to different dangers from clipped birds, so sensible precautions must be taken for the safety of the bird. All birds must of course be supervised while out of their cages. In addition and with regard to flying birds, all doors (at least all external doors and windows) must of course be kept shut. Rooms to which the birds have access should have no ceiling fans or large mirrors. All large-pane windows should have net curtains fitted, or have transfers stuck onto the windows, to remind the bird of this invisible barrier (you can also teach your bird about glass windows).

Young birds are clumsy when learning to fly, much as a human toddler learning to walk is clumsy, so occasionally there will be accidents. The urge to fly, especially in young birds is both innate and very strong. But the skills to fly well, such as braking, turning, hovering etc. are learnt behaviours. Novice flyers always fly at near stall-speed, lacking confidence and with the tail dropped. Skilled flyers are quite different; they fly with great precision and confidence. Birds need space and time to develop these skills properly.

The risk of birds crash landing can be greatly reduced by introducing the bird to all the safe places to land on in a room before it attempts to fly there. To do this, you should show the bird all the places you would like it to use as perches by setting it down and taking it up from such

places repeatedly using the step up/down commands. Once the bird has spent some time on these places you can then use the "Go" command to tell the bird to fly onto these, by now familiar perches.

Giving your bird the option of daily periods of flight will certainly be a great advantage to it, allowing it to behave in a more natural way. Provided you have done the necessary obedience training to include flight commands you should find that this adds a new dimension for both you and your bird to enjoy.

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