Obedience training for flighted pet parrots

Greg Glendell

Abstract

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.

Why let your bird fly? 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 behaviours 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 travelling between roosting sites, feeding areas and their nests. 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. In addition to the obvious health benefits of flight, birds also seem to enjoy flying. 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 prevent ‘aggression’. In many cases, birds are simply not taught 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.

The advantages of maintaining flying birds. 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 1 000 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.

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.

Full Text:

PDF

Refbacks

- There are currently no refbacks.
website on dog obedience training. A breakthrough video to help you learn all about parrot training, diet, health, controlling biting, screaming, feather plucking and lots more. Pet-Parrots.com advises you to take these videos home. Discover hundreds of secret tips to help you train and take care of your Parrot in this outstanding book by the renowned bird training expert Nathalie Roberts. *Obedience Training for Flighted Pet Parrots.* AFA Watchbird 30(2):8-11. 326 Gratz KL. Many significant aspects of parrot behaviour in the wild, such as flocking, social interaction with conspecifics, foraging on a variety of foods and flight, are denied to varying degrees to parrots kept as companion animals. Captive parrots show high levels of stereotypy, suggesting poor welfare. Welfare may be improved by appropriate environmental enrichment and changes in the social environment of captive parrots kept as companion animals; however, such changes require that caretakers have sufficient knowledge, resources and motivation to accommodate such conditions.