

# Behaviour issues



Steve Martin

## To fly or not to fly? - that is the question!

By STEVE MARTIN

It happened again, someone sent me an email asking how to teach his or her parrot to fly free outside. If I only had a nickel for ... you get the point. My standard response to this question normally involves a short, professional cautionary note couched within a biology lesson detailing the fundamentals of learning flight skill. My politically correct response does not include the questions I really want to ask like, why in the world would you want to let your parrot fly outside exposing it to all the dangers a caregiver is supposed to protect a bird from? And, have you asked your bird if it wants to be forced into this risky, great unknown? The bird's entire life has been spent indoors, protected from the dangers of the highway, pond, dog, electric wires, and countless more hazards awaiting the naïve parrot. "My bird loves to go outside" is the chorus I have heard too often from well-meaning owners who often misinterpret the flapping of the half-panicked, clipped-winged parrot gripping tightly to their fist closed securely over its feet. "He loves to exercise his wings when we go outside. If I let his wings grow in he will be able to know the joy of flight." This scene has been played a million times, and unfortunately will be played a million more.

### Introduction

One of the hottest topics on the parrot list-serves these days is whether or not a parrot owner should clip the wings of their bird. One side says "it is your responsibility as a parrot owner to clip the bird's wings to protect it from injury and allow it the freedom to experience the outdoors without fear of it flying away." The other side counters that "it is cruel and unusual punishment, indeed it is abuse to clip a parrot's wings. How can you deny the bird its right to freedom?" It is amazing to me that the two camps are so far apart. I believe when two sides are so adamant about opposing views the best answers usually lie somewhere in the middle. So, I'll take this opportunity to share my views and explore this contentious subject.

### To clip or not to clip

Whether or not to clip a parrot's wings depends on many factors. I believe the most important of these factors should be the health and welfare of the bird. For a true assessment of the value of flight to parrots you should start with its natural history. Why do parrots need to fly in the wild? It occurs to me that the most important reasons parrots fly in the wild is to locate and establish breeding sites and territories, locate and acquire food, access safe roost sites and, very importantly, they fly to escape predators. I am sure there are other reasons parrots fly, but these are the most important. Some people might say that parrots fly for fun. This may be true, but let's leave it for later.

Can we accept the reasons I mentioned above are the main reasons parrots fly in the wild? If so, can we also accept that these reasons are not important in captivity? Parrots have food, water, territory, safe roosts and no predators in



*Red-fronted Macaws take off after drinking along the Mizque River in Bolivia - like many wild parrots, these strong fliers travel for miles at a stretch on the wing. Photo: JDG*

their captive environments. So, is flying important to companion parrots? Some people believe flying is important because it helps keep birds more physically fit and healthy. I personally think this may be true. However, I suspect if someone researched the longest-lived parrots in history they would find those birds had clipped wings, or at least had limited access to flight opportunities. Some other people believe it is important for a parrot to fly because it is fun, enriching and as much a part of a parrot's nature as walking is to humans. This may be true as well.

### Let's fly

Okay, for whatever reason, let's suppose that you have decided you want your parrot to have the power of flight. The next step is to investigate whether or not your bird is capable of flight. The fact that your bird has flight feathers does not necessarily mean it is going to be a competent flyer.

Many parrot owners have let their companion parrot's clipped wings grow-in only to be disappointed when the bird did not exercise its new flight power. Parrots, like most other birds, develop their flight skills in the first few months of their lives. Nature provides motivation for a young parrot to launch itself out of the nest cavity and try its wings for the first time. Like a child learning to ride a bicycle, a young parrot will make many mistakes as it develops the skills and coordination required to become a master of the sky. A companion parrot that had its wings clipped before it learned to fly will miss out on this very important period of its life and may never develop good flight skill. When the owner allows the bird's wings to grow-in, the bird's first attempt at flight may be similar to putting a person on a bicycle for the first time in his or her life and sending them racing down a steep hill.

## The techniques

For the past 26 years, I have flown many parrots outdoors in the shows we produce. The training I give these birds before they ever fly outside is far more involved than most people might think. We raise our birds in groups, or pairs, in large cages where they can fly from perch to perch (usually around 8 feet apart). We also have three large flight pens (up to 50 feet long) where we conduct two or three training sessions per day ... every day. It takes about two months of intensive training before I am comfortable flying a parrot outside. Plus, I have a great staff of professional animal trainers who play a very important role in educating these birds. They have an excellent working knowledge of Operant Conditioning and Positive Reinforcement training techniques, and they have developed insights and sensitivities that are simply not required when working with parrots that have clipped wings. One more thing to consider, what I have mentioned here is only a fraction of our training process. There are many more key elements and several more steps that we take to ensure the safety of our birds. I believe anything less would be putting the birds in jeopardy.

The flight pens I mentioned above are great alternatives for anyone who wants to allow their birds to enjoy the outdoors or express their power of flight without the risks associated with flying free outside. The size and materials used for the flight pen would depend on the budget, but the larger the cage the better for flight confident birds. I believe a flight pen should be at least eight feet wide, eight feet tall, and 16 feet long. Of course, larger is better. Strong wire mesh is the best material to use for most parrots. However I have used a strong nylon netting for some parrot flight pens with good results. It is important to note that most parrots can chew through the nylon netting so the perches should be situated in the center of the cage and not



*Flying is important because it keeps a parrot physically fit.  
Photo: Jiri Holý.*

come close enough for the bird to grab hold of the netting. Also, it is best to monitor the birds anytime they are in the flight pen, and do not leave a bird in a nylon netted flight pen over night. Owls can startle a bird in a flight pen and can easily grab the parrot as it hangs on the side of the nylon netted cage. A large flight pen is very beneficial, both mentally and physically, for birds that are confident flyers. It is also a great place for young birds to learn their flight skills. However, a bird that did not learn to fly at an early age will have some trouble learning the flight skills required to use the entire facility and may just choose not to fly at all. One last point, be sure the flight pen offers shelter from the sun and easy access to food and water.

## The human factor

My job not only involves training free-flight birds, I also train people. I have trained over 500 professional bird trainers to fly many species of birds in free-flight programs. I have also given countless workshops and talks to companion parrot owners. These experiences have taught me that the most important factor in free-flying (or even owning) parrots is "humans." The human factor often outweighs the animal factor when I consider free-flying birds. Not all humans are created equal. Some people have a talent for understanding birds; an empathy that allows them to sense what is going on inside that bird's mind. Still, others are so far away from even the most basic understanding of what makes a bird tick that in my opinion they should not be allowed to have birds. These are often the people who obtain a bird simply for self-serving purposes. One guy wanted me to teach him to train his bird to do tricks so he could "pick up more chicks at the beach." Unfortunately, anyone can own a parrot.

Owning a parrot is like driving a car ... anyone can do it. However, free flying a parrot outside is like driving a car in the Daytona 500. It should be reserved for only the most experienced and talented people who have the right equipment. In the case of flying parrots free outside, the equipment must begin with a good working knowledge of behaviour modification techniques that are based on positive reinforcement, and a bird that is a confident and capable flyer.

Flying birds free outside is something I can readily discourage. Flying parrots free inside is something that I choose to leave up to the individual parrot owner. However, I will offer the following thoughts. Many parrots enjoy the opportunity to use their natural flight skills. These birds are the ones that have good flight skill and confidence, the ones that can manoeuvre around corners, change direction in mid air, and make controlled landing each time they fly. These flight-confident birds are less likely to get injured than birds with lesser flight abilities, but they are not immune to accidents. Even the best flyers have drowned in toilets, crashed into exposed windows, gotten hurt landing on hot stoves, or have flown out open doors or off the shoulder of their owner who forgot they were with them. This list of lethal possibilities is probably just as long, or longer, for parrots with clipped wings. For instance, many parrots with clipped wings are stepped on by their human caregivers each year, something that rarely happens to parrots with good flight skills. Even parrots with clipped wings have flown away when taken outdoors. Clipping a parrot's wings does not guarantee that it cannot fly. Plus, a parrot with clipped wings outdoors is still vulnerable to accidents involving cars, dogs, cats, bodies of water, traumatic impact with the ground or other hard objects, etc.

## Summary

The debate over whether or not to clip a parrot's wings will likely continue as long as humans keep parrots as pets. There are valid points to consider on both sides of the argument. My hope is that people will consider the health and welfare of the birds, plus their own personal abilities and living situation, when making this very important decision.

I will continue to caution people on the dangers of free-flight parrots and will avoid encouraging anyone to free fly a parrot outside through my books, lectures, or videos. For me, this is the only ethical position I can take. If I include free-flight in a book, lecture, or video it would be similar to giving instruction on sky diving without following up with personal attention. I would have to assume that the person would read the book and understand it enough to be successful. If something went wrong, I would have to share in the responsibility.

I believe most parrot owners are responsible people who want only what is best for their bird. Sometimes this means leaving the bird full-flight, and sometimes this means clipping the bird's wings. Let the choice be made with the bird's welfare in mind.

