

## 'In my opinion...':

is a regular feature in *PsittaScene*. Here we include submissions on whatever pertinent issues you would like to see discussed. What issues do you think our readers would be interested in? Contact us at [uk@worldparrottrust.org](mailto:uk@worldparrottrust.org) with suggestions or submissions.

## Free flight

By CHRIS SHANK, Oregon, USA

**I believe that a companion parrot should be allowed her natural birthright - the right and freedom to fly outdoors. Admittedly, these are very controversial words especially when read by caretakers who adamantly believe their parrots should remain clipped at all times.**

I've been free flying cockatoos outdoors for over twenty-five years. And, yes, I have had my share of trials and heartbreaks. Despite those, I have never considered not flying my cockatoos. To me, free flying is a natural extension of my way of bird keeping. All twenty of my cockatoos live outdoors in large aviaries. It seemed to me a logical next step to allow some of the 'toos flight outside of their aviaries. I released my first flying cockatoo, a Sulphur-crest, with a minimum of flight training and I was fortunate that I didn't lose him. Despite this dubious beginning, he has been successfully flying outside for twenty-seven years. Of course, now I know better and ensure that birds I intend to free fly have the training to do so.

I was once a clipping advocate. Maybe advocate is too strong a word. I kept my birds flighted, but recommended that other people clip their parrots for safety's sake. This seems now a rather arrogant view. Why did I think other people's birds would be unsafe flying? My full-winged birds were certainly as safe as clipped birds, both indoors and out. Did I think the average parrot caretaker not able to develop the training skills needed to keep a parrot with full wings secure? Although I did not consider myself an elitist, it appeared as though my advice to clip was saying otherwise.

Please understand I certainly do not endorse outdoor free flight for everyone. Let me emphasize that not every parrot owner has the aptitude to train a free flying parrot, has the desire to fly her or his parrot or even has a parrot that is a good candidate for free flight. That said, I know enough about many parrot caretakers to understand that some of them are very successful in learning how to train for free flight and subsequently train their

companion parrot to do so. It's not an activity just for parrots trained by professional trainers in bird shows.

For those who do undertake this most extraordinary and demanding mission of free flight training, a highly rewarding experience awaits them and their birds. To succeed in flight training you need an education in proper training methods, patience, consistency and an acute ability to observe and interpret a parrot's behaviour. These skills must become second nature to you as the trainer. Just as a person must meet certain criteria to be successful at free flight, so must the parrot. The requirements are many and include: physical fitness and ability to fly, thorough training, familiarity with the outdoors and predator savvy. With proper and successful training, the relationship between caretaker and parrot is lifted to new heights, both figuratively and



Photo: Dean Moser

literally. Trust and respect between trainer-caretaker and a flying parrot reach pinnacles unknown to owners of clipped birds.

Free flying a parrot is not a casual undertaking. It can be full of dangers and pitfalls. This cannot be overstated. However, it can also be heart soaring, exuberating and life changing for the caretaker. Personally, I feel privileged to have developed a relationship with my flyers that extends beyond the cage or play stand. Watching as my cockatoo soars down from a tree to my hand or gazing at my small flock of five play together in the air or just having my 'toos keep me company while I garden adds a dimension to the world of parrot keeping that is hard to explain. Daily I experience awe for the



Photo: David Baca

miracle of flight and the nature of my birds.

For the parrot, free flying is among the ultimate of enrichments. Parrot behaviours that may otherwise be suppressed in the home or cage environment are acted out naturally while the parrot flies. Making decisions, thinking "on the wing," revelling in the sun, wind and clouds and developing a superb physical state are just a few of the enrichments the flying parrot attains.

As it stands now, resources for learning to train a parrot to fly outdoors or even indoors are few and far between. Indeed, training a parrot, let alone for flight, is not common. But changes are happening. Workshops in positive reinforcement training methods for companion parrots are now being given around the country and for this I am encouraged (*see Psitta News p17 and PS Vol 18 No 2, May 06 p19*).

Optimistically, I see a day where it will be common for the companion parrot owner to seek out and enrol in a series of local parrot training classes - similar to puppy or dog classes that are available now. I see a day where workshops will be held to introduce people to the world of free flying parrots - what it entails, what it's all about and whether or not it is for them and their parrots. I

envision a day where training for parrots will advance beyond behaviour management and trick training and move on to free flight. Flight classes will be easily accessible for those who have the desire and ability to pursue it. I see a day where experienced people with their skilled flyers will gather at fly meets in a welcoming and supporting environment to fly their parrots outdoors or gather in large buildings for indoor flight. It may surprise many to know that, in fact some, if not all of the above is taking place now. Ultimately, I'm looking forward to the day when a person watching my birds fly will say, "Can I learn to do this with my parrot?" rather than say, "Won't your birds fly away?" It's coming... 