

FREE LOFTING VERSUS TETHERING FOR BIRDS USED IN DEMONSTRATIONS

by Lucy Smith

Traditionally free flight birds, either those used for falconry or for demonstrations, have been kept by employing the practice of tethering. When they are not flying it is normal to attach them by means of a leash to a perch of some kind. Free lofting is just the opposite. In free lofting the bird, when not working, is free to fly within its aviary.

Tethering has been successfully employed by falconers for hundreds of years. In these situations, birds may fly for prolonged periods of time over great distances. However, at ZSL London Zoo we do not practice falconry as it is commonly understood. Our birds fly once a day in a demonstration and are therefore able to fly free for just 10 minutes. We discussed and agreed to trial an option which afforded free flight birds the choice to move around freely within an aviary and to see whether or not former practices (i.e. the immobilising of birds unless they were in use) could be challenged in the case of demonstration birds. We have practiced these techniques for non-raptor species, vultures and caracaras and thought it would be beneficial expanding what we had learnt to include other species.

We are currently working towards free lofting all of our demonstration birds and have achieved this with 12 out of our 13 raptors.

Getting started

We had to have the right aviaries in terms of size, design and location for this to be achievable. These were constructed at the periphery of our display lawn where the birds are flown. Each aviary had a release hatch allowing the bird to be flown directly from the aviary into the display. As we weigh our birds daily to make sure they are flying at their optimum weight (too heavy and they are not motivated to fly, too light and they could be under-condition) we added a weighing station inside, previously the birds would have had to be carried out into the corridor to be weighed. The addition of a weighing station made the daily weighing much easier.

The benefits of this design for the management of display birds are multiple. We did not have to collect birds from far away aviaries for demonstrations, thus greatly reducing the time they spent in boxes; neither did we have to remove them from their aviaries for weighing. This meant that the bird would not have to be pursued but could rather choose to engage with us on its own terms creating a much more positive working environment. The birds could be encouraged to fly to us by using positive

reinforcement techniques. Being centred in one area also reduced the need for vehicle movement on site which is both safer and a reduction of our carbon footprint.

When we began the free lofting process of our birds it was very much a case of letting them free in their aviary and hope that they respond to the food we were offering them. Most of the birds would fly directly out of their aviaries to begin their routines in a demonstration, but some still needed to be transported by carry case. On these occasions we would fly the bird directly down to our glove for a bit of food in their aviaries and then let them fly into their box for another piece of food. As you will hear, different birds reacted in different ways to this procedure and we found ourselves adapting our techniques to accommodate the birds.

Harris Hawks

At London Zoo we had three male Harris Hawks which, until we first free lofted them five years ago, were tethered during the summer flying months and free lofted over winter during their moult. They were all of a similar age, in similarly designed aviaries, and all had been trained using traditional falconry techniques. However they all reacted very differently to the same free lofting protocol.

Bud – was eager to fly to us from his aviary during the free lofting process, so much so that he would be waiting at the door to be weighed in the mornings and to be boxed for demonstrations. Waiting on the gravel could lead to foot problems and we did not want to pick him up from the doorway as it could have led to a situation where he escaped into the corridor.

Harry – enjoyed being in his aviary so much that he often would not come to the handler which presented problems for weighing and often for demonstrations. On two days out of seven he would not come to a demonstration at all.

Mac – took to free lofting well but would often not fly to the glove when we went to collect him, and had to be flown directly into his box to be taken to demonstrations.

Common Buzzard

Our Common Buzzard was tethered during the initial training period and after the first season we put her into free lofting to moult. We found that during this period she would still step up onto the glove. We could attribute this to the significant training work we did with her making her completely at ease with her handlers. It is also relevant that this is a crèche reared bird and subsequently more socialised towards us than a parent reared individual would be.

Chilean Buzzard Eagle

We found our Chilean Buzzard Eagle also took very well to free lofting after the initial tethering period; in fact he took very well to all training procedures and was always a very calm bird. This bird was a product of double clutching and had undergone some hand rearing before being returned to its parents, so was partially imprinted, which made the situation much easier. However, he is now in an aviary with limited handling or contact during his moulting period. This is in order to try to discourage the juvenile behaviour that is common with hand-reared birds. If left unchecked it can result in a permanent infantile response. We will evaluate how the free lofting works out for him next season.

Although the partial imprinting of these two birds has helped us with the free lofting procedure, I must stress that we do not recommend imprinting a buzzard, falcon or eagle species as this can lead to aggression, gripping the glove and continual vocalisation in these birds.

Overcoming challenges

One of the significant challenges that we incurred was with our Harris Hawks. These, we found, would require so much food during the winter months to keep their weight up, due to a combination of the cold weather and an increased period of activity in the aviary, that they were not motivated to come to us at all. This problem eventually diminished when they got used to the freedom their aviary provided and their levels of activity reduced.

We found that with every new problem that arose, we had to be flexible and adapt our procedure. Below is a list of challenges that we faced and how we overcame them.

- In the case of birds waiting at the door to be collected, we station trained them to a perch and always collected them from there instead of the ground. If they were ever waiting on the ground we would always point them to the same perch until eventually they would end up waiting there for us instead.

- We also had incidents of birds flying at doors when we came to collect them. So, with most of our birds now we take the boxes into the enclosure and box them there, to try and curb their fixation with the door.

- With some of our birds we have the boxes permanently inside their enclosure so they become part of the furniture and we are not bringing in a novel item in that could frighten the bird. It also saves the hassle of moving the boxes and reduces the risk of birds escaping through a widely opened door.

- We made sure that the perches for most of the birds were ones that we could reach to make it easier for the birds to step up onto the glove if they



Our Common Buzzard was stationed trained to stop her waiting at the door.



We keep our Barn Owl boxes permanently inside their aviary.

preferred to do so.

- With some birds we had to call them to a perch before calling them to the glove.
- We use distraction methods to keep our birds' attention whilst handling them inside their aviaries rather than taking hold of the jesses (leather leg straps).
- All our birds are weighed on weighing platforms inside their enclosure as opposed to out in the corridor as we used to do. This again negates the need to take hold of jesses.

Adaptability really is the key to finding a method that works for you and your bird, but when you find something that works make sure you are consistent with your methods, that way the bird always knows what is expected.

When working free lofted birds it must be noted that a mutual level of trust must exist between bird and handler. A bird that has been flying free in an



The lure that we used to bring the Kestrel to its weighing station.

aviary is more likely to come down to a handler if it has had mostly positive experiences when doing so. Issues that can add to that trust are how secure they feel on the glove of the handler or knowing they will always get food when they come to the glove or box. Things that can destroy that trust are long periods of time spent in boxes, or the restriction of having their jesses taken, particularly in the case of free lofted birds as they have not had that feeling of restriction on their feet reinforced. We try not to take hold of the jesses in situations unless it compromises the safety of the bird or handler, this means that if a bird was ever to bait (attempt to fly away) it would not associate that negative feeling of restriction with the handler. However we would always take the jesses at the end of a routine when either the bird has a full crop, or to restrain it if it had previously flown off. The design of our new aviaries with release hatches and inside weighing stations allows us that freedom of choice.

Future projects - Free lofting a Common Kestrel

We have been lucky in that the majority of birds we have managed to free loft are hand reared (owls) or imprinted to a degree (buzzards). Or as in the case of our Harris Hawk, which is a social bird anyway, have worked with us for so long that a good amount of trust has been placed in us as the handlers.

The final demonstration bird of our collection that has yet to be free lofted is a parent reared Common Kestrel. These are very sensitive birds with brittle feathers, which if the bird is frightened could easily be damaged, thus rendering them unable to fly in demonstrations.

He is currently free lofted for his winter moult, but we want to keep him free lofted throughout the flying season as well. During the winter period with

optimal food he goes back to being almost completely wild and as summer approaches we need to drop his weight down. We will need to find a way to weigh him daily and pick him up ready for demonstrations.

As he does not fly glove to glove in demonstrations but is very focussed on flying to a lure, we decided to create the above device, a lure attached to an astro turfed board.

Our plan

Throughout the winter months we will feed him exclusively on this lure placed on his weighing station inside his aviary. This acts as a target that he will always fly down to for food. As the summer months approach and we start reducing his food, we can place the scales under the lure and check his weight from outside the aviary. We hypothesise that as his weight decreases and he becomes more food motivated we will be able to move inside the aviary with him and eventually move to trading him off the lure for a piece of food.

We trialled this with some success when he first entered his free lofting aviary directly after the summer season when he was still at his flying weight, however, it is uncertain whether he will be as responsive after the winter months and a period of minimal contact. We will have to wait and see.

Conclusions

When a bird is first put into free lofting, the handler does have to be adaptable; try a multitude of permutations of your original protocol until you have discovered what works for you and your bird. You may have to think inventively but when you have found what works for you, be consistent. The beginning stages may be time consuming, but what may start out as time consuming can ultimately save time in the long run.

If you were to ask the question "Can we train raptor species without the need for tethering"? The answer would be "it depends upon the bird or the species, but for many the answer would be no". Tethering is often essential during the early stages of working with most raptor species, owls being one of the exceptions. Tethering can speed up the training process as the bird is learns to accept the prevailing conditions much faster than training a parent reared bird in a free lofted environment, thus reducing the length of time the bird is stressed at the trainer's presence.

After this period we should be looking towards free lofting. As handlers we have a responsibility to offer the bird maximum freedom of choice. We need to ask ourselves the question, are our birds coming to us because they want to, or because they have to?

BREEDING AND HAND-REARING OF BLACK PALM COCKATOOS *Probosciger aterrimus* AT THE JURONG BIRD PARK SINGAPORE

by John Sha

Introduction

The Black Palm Cockatoo *Probosciger aterrimus* belongs to the family Cacatuidae and the order Psittaciformes. There are three recognized subspecies: *P. a. aterrimus*, *P. a. goliath*, and *P. a. stenolophus* (Schubot et al., 1992). The Black Palm Cockatoo is listed under CITES Appendix I (UNEP-WCMC, 2012) and is considered to be of least concern on the IUCN Red List although the population is believed to be declining (IUCN, 2012).

Black Palm Cockatoos are distributed throughout the Northern Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, Australia, from Pormpuraaw in the north, to Saltwater Creek in the west, and Princess Charlotte Bay in the east (Garnett et al., 2010). The birds thrive in woodlands but can also be found in closed forests. Breeding adults nest in hollow trees such as eucalyptus, and the nests are aggressively defended (Garnett et al., 2010). They have an unconventional courtship display, where the males use sticks to hit the tree trunk repeatedly to attract females (Wood, 1984).

Black Palm Cockatoos are known to have a relatively low rate of reproduction, compared to other species of Psittaciformes in the wild (Murphy et al., 2003). Females only lay a single egg per clutch and in the wild were observed to only produce a clutch every 2.2 years (Murphy et al., 2003). Due to the long egg-laying interval, destruction of nests by forest fires, and predation of eggs and chicks, wild Black Palm Cockatoos have a mean of only 0.11 fledglings per pair of adults per year. (Murphy et al., 2003). Black Palm Cockatoos in captivity lay eggs more frequently than their wild counterparts.

The Jurong Bird Park successfully hand-reared a Black Palm Cockatoo in the year 2000. Two eggs had hatched after incubation by foster breeding adults, but only one chick survived (Lim and Khin, 2000). In 2012, a breeding pair produced four clutches of eggs. The clutches were laid at intervals of approximately two weeks. The chicks were hatched using artificial incubation and were hand-raised by aviculture caretakers at the Breeding and Research Centre.



Smith, Lucy. 2013. "Free Lofting Versus Tethering For Birds Used In Demonstrations." *The Avicultural magazine* 119(4), 165–171.

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