



Lessons Learned: Keeping flighted birds in your home

by Jenny Drummey

In the past few months, I've let 4 of my birds fly freely in the house when I am there. The benefits of flight far outweigh the drawbacks: those among the flock with flight are stronger and healthier than they were before. They are intellectually challenged by the complex choices that flight introduces. But with flight comes risks.

Create an environment that makes flight as safe as possible. Bird-proof the flight zone against dangers like water (do not allow access to kitchen, bathroom or laundry room), loose screens and open windows, and chemicals that your bird could ingest. Watch what your bird does when flying and where she lands. If she gravitates to a dangerous spot, don't allow her to access it, or remove the danger.

The flock dynamic changes when birds can fly. As the birds choose which cage to spend time on, which birds to be close to, and when they want to hang out with you, you may notice unexpected rivalries, friendships, and poop in strange places.

Initially, I allowed Nero, my Quaker, to fly for his health. He has bumblefoot, a condition that causes lesions on his feet. The lesions are slow

to heal, and bumblefoot is hard to cure. I do not know how long he had it before he came to me. The trouble he has walking, and the way he stands and perches, indicates some damage to his feet and legs beyond the few visible sores.

Since Nero did not walk well, he did not climb well, and he didn't get a lot of exercise. He is an excellent flyer, and quickly learned how to navigate a perfect landing on top of my head. Nero's flights have made him stronger and given him a confidence he did not have.

Nero developed a relationship with my foster Myrtle the Indian ringneck when he began spending a lot of time hanging out with Myrtle on her cage. Myrtle had been an extremely anxious bird, cowering and trembling in the back of her cage every time anyone approached. But as Nero moved from his cage to her cage, Myrtle began to follow.

I saw Myrtle gain confidence as she flew. She no longer cowers in fear at the approach of a human. I can place a sunflower seed on her cage and step back and she will fly to the cage and get the seed. She can set her own comfort zone, and is slowly becoming more acclimated to people.



QBall

QBall then joined the flying flock. He lacked Nero's grace and acrobatics, and Myrtle's speed, but his flight skills have improved remarkably in a short time. At first, he couldn't land very well. But, over the past month, he has honed his skills and now lands on my finger when I hold it out for him.



Henry, an African grey, is also flighted. She will sometimes take a short flight to the rocking chair in the next room, or to the bannister, but mostly she flies when startled. It's a cacophony, and her landings are as clumsy as an albatross's, but she does flap very well if you ask her to.

While the benefits of flight outweigh the risks, the risks are real. When I started to let the birds fly, I had already considered the basics, and thought I had taken all the precautions.

But I was shocked when QBall stepped on my hand after returning from a brief trip to another bird's cage. QBall was bleeding - and it seemed like a lot. He had probably been bitten by another bird whose cage he landed on. I took QBall to the bathroom and pressed the wound with cotton. The bleeding stopped soon enough, and with a little aloe vera and Neosporin, his foot healed in a day. With flight comes the danger of injury from other birds.

Then there was the time I was heading out the front door, with no flighted birds upstairs (as

far as I knew). As I opened the door, I heard the familiar rustle of flapping wings and turned to see QBall heading for me. He almost flew out the door trying to land on my shoulder. Another lesson: You think you know where your flighted birds are? Think again, and be extra vigilant when you leave the house.

When I got home from work one day, I found Nero collapsed on a bookshelf upstairs, panting.

It was a hot summer day, and the air conditioning was not on. The house was a bit warm. I was very concerned and sprayed Nero with cool water using a mister to bring his body temperature down. Within 10 minutes he was normal. Poor Nero must have literally worn himself out flying, and become overheated. Another lesson: Don't leave flighted birds unattended (I must have forgotten to lock his cage door when I left for work that morning).



**Not ready for
free flight?
Teaching your bird to
flap vigorously on cue
can give her some of
the exercise she needs.**

Continued, *Keeping Flighted Birds...*

Can you make the area where your birds fly as safe as possible?

Are you ready to have birds swooping through your rooms? It can be a wonderful experience for them (and you!), but it requires extra vigilance by all family members. Ask yourself:

Are you willing to have birds flying around you? Landing on you?

Are you ready to extend the area you have to clean? Birds usually poop before they take off, but not always.

Do you have a busy home, with lots of visitors? Can you ensure that they won't accidentally let the bird out?

Do you have a way to restrict your bird's flight zone?

If you have experiences with flighted birds in your home, please send them to me at drummey@mindspring.com so we can share them with other Beakin' Readers.



Wendy Kiska

FLIGHT TRAINING, by Wendy Kiska

One of the most important things to consider with free-flighted parrots is safety. While you can bird-proof your home to a large extent, we all know that parrots find exactly the things we try to hide. So, how do we balance wanting to let our birds fly free in our homes with the risks necessarily associated with such an activity? One way is to train flight on cue or to par-

ticular locations. Instead of letting the birds fly free all over the house, set up some areas that are acceptable flight destinations and reward the bird for staying on the flight path. For example, you can train directional movements through finger or arm points, or train the parrot to fly to you on cue. While not a sure thing (nothing with parrots ever is), hopefully the repeat behavior of flying to and from certain destinations will minimize the chance that the parrot will explore non-acceptable areas of the home.

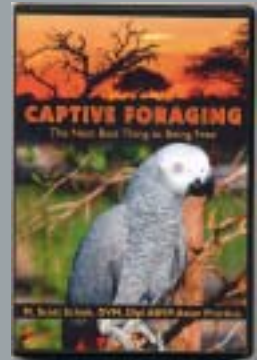
If you are interested in living successfully with a free-flighted parrot, please make sure to attend our seminar with Chris Shank in December - the lessons will be invaluable and help to avoid common but costly mistakes. Look for a summary of my experience at Chris Shank's FlyAbout 2006 (Indoor and Outdoor Flight School) in our Winter newsletter (see www.cockatoodowns.com).



Chris Shank

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A video about how to provide environmental enrichment for parrots through foraging trees and toys, by Scott Echols, DVM (president-elect of the Association of Avian Veterinarians).



Did you know that in the wild, parrots spend up to 70% of their day foraging? And what do they do in our living rooms? Maybe foraging would greatly improve your parrot's life, and even prevent other dysfunctional behaviors.