

Learning to Fly

“Learning to Fly” is devoted to understanding, discussing, and exploring the many intricate details of flight. Whether one chooses to clip flight feathers or accept the responsibilities of caring for a flighted bird is a personal decision. However, there are many things to know and learn about flight that can be helpful to flighted and non flighted bird owners everywhere. (Especially when that supposedly non flighted bird flies out the door!)

Flighted behaviors may not be a good goal for every bird or caregiver. Should you decide to pursue this path, keep in mind that flighted behaviors are most successfully trained to the highest level following a structured plan based on positive reinforcement training strategies. Following these practices can reduce, but do not eliminate, the risk of flying birds outdoors.



Photo Credit: Hugh Choi



Carly and Raz
Photo credit:
Hugh Choi

Carly Gets Her Wings: Flight Training on Unfledged African Grey Parrot

By Linda (Raz) Rasmussen
www.likambo.com

Carly came to me in exactly the way we are told not to acquire a parrot. I saw her in a pet store while picking up seeds for my homing pigeon. I had read enough about African Grey parrots to know I might want one someday, but certainly did not plan on it being that day. I knew nothing about the importance of a good breeder, socialization, or allowing babies to fledge. But this two-month old bird gripped my heart and I left two hours later, a hefty deposit lighter. Fortunately the store kept the young birds out with people, so over the next two months, between my daily visits and everyone else in the store, she was well socialized. Unfortunately, to control a table full of eight baby Greys, all of them were clipped before they even knew what their wings were for, ten primaries on each side.



Carly's first flights outside.
Photo credit: Hugh Choi



Carly developed a variety of techniques for flying down as well as landing. Photo credit: Hugh Choi

Once home, Carly was a lively but physically cautious bird. She had poor balance, and anytime she tried to fly she fell to the ground like a potato. It took months before she would set foot on a swing. As her flight feathers began to molt, I felt torn about having her clipped again. She accompanied me around town all the time, and I was slow to realize I was taking huge chances not having her on a harness when we were out. Her first startled flight down the length of the park by our house (with only two flight feathers) convinced me I needed to make a decision about flying.

About this time I discovered a small group of companion parrot owners who were training their birds for outdoor flighted recall. These were people who, like me, wanted to give their birds the chance to really be birds, while ensuring as much safety as possible outdoors; whether outdoor flight was by choice or by accident. When Carly was nearly a year and a half old, still missing seven primary feathers, we started our journey. I decided to let her own development be the deciding factor in how far we went with it. My goal was to teach her flighted recall, and help her develop the skills needed to control her flight and gain physical confidence. At the beginning she could only do what I called her "kamikaze" flight – a straight bolt full speed ahead with a crash landing on whatever happened to be there. She did not know how to turn, or land, or even take off in a controlled manner. We had many steps ahead before even thinking about free flight.

OUR PROGRAM OF FLIGHT AND RECALL TRAINING

I had done a bit of work with clicker training (targeting and a few tricks) and had been introduced to the princi-



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ples of applied behavioral analysis in Susan Friedman's on line course. I believe this gave me an excellent foundation.

The first steps in flighted recall training were not flighted at all, but involved getting a controlled jump off a counter top through a series of approximations. At each successful attempt she was treated with a small bit of her favorite nuts. First I asked her to "come here" from increasingly greater distances, starting with a big step up, to a long stretching step, and eventually to the distance where she had to jump off the counter. This voluntary jump is a huge step for most unfledged birds, even if they can do long flights when startled. We would typically start out small, work up to longer distances, and then make a few attempts at the jump. Her body language (eyes very alert, wings outstretched, moving from side to side) indicated to me that she was eager to do it, but lacked the confidence and skill. Because she responds well to verbal encouragement, I used a lot of that as well. I do not consider this to be merely repeating the cue, which can encourage a slow response. Her failure to do the behavior was out of caution, not ignoring the request; she was very attentive and clearly testing ways to do it. When she did not do the jump, I went back to the longer stretching steps and some targeting to end the session on a positive note.

After about ten days, she finally lifted off the counter and hopped onto my hand. During the training sessions she would repeat this over and over, even after I wanted to end the session. I called this our "Jumping Fool" stage. Over the next couple of months as her flight feathers continued to molt and grow in, we worked on adding distance (two to six feet) as she learned how to fly and land. When she was only missing a few primaries on each side she was able to fly across a small room. We started to work on other skills like turning a corner, flying up from the ground, and flying down from a door top. Each introduction of a new element of difficulty was treated like a brand new behavior, by starting small and working up through a series of approximations. Teaching flight skills along with recall is as much about teaching confidence as it is about training the specific behavior, and I believe this gradual approach has ultimately made her a very confident flyer.

During this time we continued to go outdoors, now on a harness, and included a few training exercises. In the park by our house she had a favorite pine tree with many low branches. New outdoor fliers often have trouble knowing how to fly down from a treetop if they land there. So we did target training in the pine tree. For these "tree crawls," I would place her on an inner branch and have her come to my hand through increasingly challenging climbing and flying paths. She was very enthusiastic about this game, and often made the path even more difficult by adding in extra branches and doing part of the route while hanging upside-down. I discovered later that this was a very handy "emergency exit" strategy to have trained when we started flying outside.

USING FOOD MANAGEMENT WITH TRAINING

When we started training, Carly was not very interested in treats. She was being free fed, and was a very fussy eater whose weight fluctuated a lot, mostly on the too-thin side. Like many parrot owners, the thought of not keeping food out and available 24/7 seemed harsh to me, even though I did not do that with my dog or cats, or even myself. But her interest in training sessions was not always very high, even when reserving her favorite foods for rewards. So I switched to regular scheduled feedings twice per day, with only training treats outside of meals. She was fed a small breakfast, and had her main training session just before dinner.

I was amazed at the difference this simple change in timing of food delivery made. Her interest in training



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*Carly often flies with Hugh Choi's Red-fronted Macaws, and it was interesting to note the differences in flight styles, from the very smooth, graceful Red-front manner, to the darting, diving African Grey style.
Photo credit: Hugh Choi*

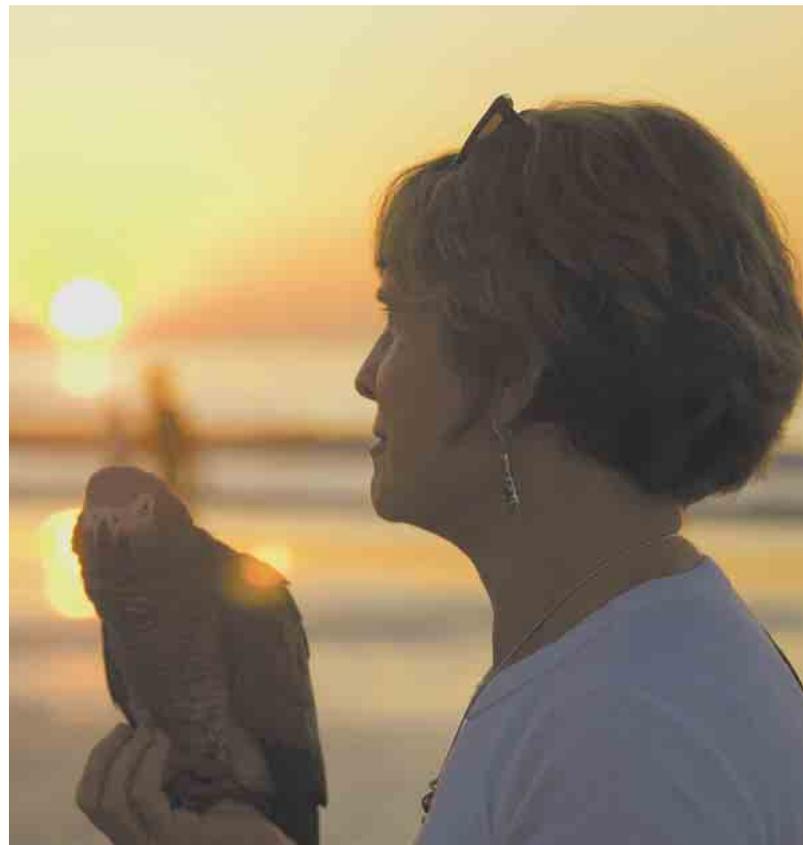
Finally, after about six months, watching her flight skills alongside more experienced fliers, I decided to incorporate flying at the beach into Carly's routine. Photo credit: Hugh Choi

sessions increased dramatically. But even beyond the training, she began to eat a more balanced diet, was far less picky about different foods, and her weight stabilized and actually increased slightly over the first few months of training. Weight management to increase motivation or focus was not necessary for her until we made the transition to outdoor flying. And this was only necessary for the initial transition.

Training treats were offered during our normal evening training sessions, which ran from 10-20 minutes per day. I also incorporated positive reinforcement with food rewards or other secondary reinforcement into our daily interactions at home and at the office. Since she is rarely caged, this gave me plenty of opportunity to further strengthen the training bond through many positive experiences

MAKING THE DECISION TO FLY OUTDOORS

After we had been training for ten months, we practiced for a while in a big auditorium at work, and then I decided she was ready for the next step: outdoors. My personal criteria were that she had developed her skills as far as possible indoors (maneuvering in flight, braking, landing) and that the recall response was auto-



*Carly and Raz resting after a full afternoon of flying.
Photo credit: Hugh Choi*

matic. To prepare for the transition outdoors, I brought her weight down temporarily by about two percent over a period of eight to ten days to increase her interest in treats and help maintain focus in a very new situation. Then we started all over again! Just because she was doing twenty foot recalls indoors does not mean she was ready to do that outdoors. We started with step-ups from a bench in the park, then the short (three to five foot) flights, and over a week or so worked up to twenty feet.

After practicing straight line point A to point B recalls for a couple weeks, I began to incorporate flying small loops back to my hand, another behavior we had trained indoors I encouraged larger loops by offering no treats or less favored treats for small loops, and favorite treats for bigger ones. One problem we encountered was that she had a problem finding middle ground between small loops and full turbo-charged loops around the tree line of the park. Because she was still learning to fly down at the greater heights outdoors, these big loops often ended up high in a tree. But her emergency exit strategy worked, and she would come down to me dropping from branch to branch like a monkey, often upside down. Before long she was dropping long distances and flying to the next branch, or dropping/flying all the way down to my hand from thirty to forty feet up, sometimes out of mid-air (her "paratrooper drop"). We practiced flying down from high branches inside the canopy of a large sycamore tree, and this helped as well. She developed a variety of techniques for flying down as well as landing. To learn to fly in wind, I used her harness with a short leash on windy days and did recalls from the park bench or the ground. She picked up on the mechanics fairly quickly.

Over several months flying at the park she became very playful with it, often diving, screaming and whistling in the air. We often fly with Hugh Choi and his Red-fronted Macaws, and it was interesting to note the differences in flight styles, from the very smooth, graceful Red-front manner, to the darting, diving African Grey style. Finally, after about six months, watching her flight skills alongside more experienced fliers, I decided to incorporate flying at the beach into Carly's routine. She was used to the beach from many walks with a harness, so the environment was not new to her. Nevertheless, we started all over again, with a temporary slight weight drop, small A-B recalls, working up to small loops, and then larger loops. A few months later, she is now flying with the Red-fronts, doing dives, mid-air flips, careening in the wind, and still occasionally doing the "paratrooper

drop" landing. And there is always more to assimilate. Some of my favorites are listed here: http://www.likambo.com/training/training_links.html.

THE MOST IMPORTANT LESSONS I FEEL I LEARNED THROUGH THIS PROCESS ARE:

- Use positive reinforcement in all daily interactions. From step-ups to going in a carrier, I try to treat every request with the question in mind "Why should she want to?" (Parrots are wild species; Carly does not understand "because I'm the mom!")
- Practice, practice, practice. This was easy with Carly. The better she got, the longer she wanted to train. Go with it. Make this a consistent routine in their life. I strongly feel Carly's composure outdoors when confronted with new things (seagulls, blimps, helicopters, screaming kids) is due in large part to her being very secure in the training routine.
- Make adjustments. Each bird is an individual, and no plan can account for everything that might happen. It's great to set goals, but pointless and sometimes counterproductive to set deadlines.

TRAINING THE TRAINER

The process of training has been as much about training me as training Carly, and there have been many fantastic resources along the way. First hand discussions (online or by phone usually) with other companion parrot owners who had trained for outdoor flight were indispensable. Seeing some of them in person was both instructive and inspiring. So were many general training articles, workshops and classes such as Living and Learning with Parrots (Susan Friedman), Barbara Heidenreich's workshop and articles, the Natural Encounters Inc library, the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators resources library, Melinda Johnson's clicker training book, and Karen Pryor's writings.

Most of all, I learned the value of patience. Carly could live to be fifty years old or more. It took eighteen months from first jump training to flying at the beach. Every minute of it was a blast, and even if we had stopped indoors, or in small spaces outdoors, every minute would have been worth it to see the joy she has in the air.