

Free lofting Falcons: The Manageable Myth

Nicky Plaskitt CPBT-KA
Shaping Behaviour

Falcons are 'flighty'. They are 'highly strung' and 'spook' too easily. You cannot free loft a falcon – it'll injure itself. Falcons are different to other birds of prey; they don't adapt to not being tethered.

You must all have heard all these things. I know I have. And some, if not all of them, are true. That didn't mean we were going to give up without trying.

I recently left my nine-year post as Section Leader of Birds at Paradise Wildlife Park. Any of you who have met me, heard me present or read my articles in the past know that we have spent almost that entire 9 years transitioning our birds to a free lofted environment, where they fly free from aviaries daily for shows. They also fly without anklets or jesses. I say we have spent 9 years doing this because although some birds were easier than others, this has been a process. It took time and thought, and planning, and most of all, problem solving. I was incredibly lucky to have Tom Clark as my Deputy who believed in what we were doing and was able to offer me solutions that sometimes I could not see. We worked together, because we both wanted to see if having our birds fly in this way was possible, and if it improved their welfare by offering them more control. When I left Paradise, Tom took over as Section Leader, and is now an IAATE member. I am sure he will go on to do great things in the future.

In February 2020 we were offered a 10-month-old male Lanner Falcon *Falco biarmicus*. He was so completely different to the other species we were flying that we jumped at the chance. I was told he was tethered, and had been flown a little bit, but was really a blank canvas. He was also imprinted, which no doubt helped us with some of the mistakes we made when training him as he was so forgiving. However, the things we changed and learned along the way gave Tom and I confidence we could do this with a parent reared falcon too, and in fact currently the team are waiting for a young Eurasian kestrel *Falco tinnunculus* to arrive, who will be housed and trained in the same way as Jet.

Essentially, we learnt how important our antecedent arrangement was, and that when we identified a problem, we could usually fix it by changing the environmental set up. As a back up plan, we had tethering, and this really was a backup – if we felt Jet was causing himself injury or it was unsafe to house him in this way, we would absolutely have made that choice. But with a bit of creative thinking and some hasty building jobs we managed to avoid this and now have a free lofted falcon, flying free daily and doing an excellent job of it.

I won't tell you it was easy, or without frustrations, but if any of you have, or are thinking of free lofting your falcons in the future, consider this a list of challenges we had to overcome and how we did it. If its not possible for you now, that's ok too. But maybe one day it will be.

The first thing I should tell you about is our aviary set up. All aviaries are situated around the flying arena, meaning birds can be released from and fly back into their aviaries without needing to crate them and transport them. This has pros and cons – the pros being it definitely made it easier for training a lot of the birds in this way, cons however being that they can all see what's going on and we do get some anticipation before it is their turn to fly.

In 2014 we built an offshow block of aviaries, with bars instead of mesh, so we could free loft hawks and buzzards. This is the area we used for Jet. This area also has a 'safety corridor' with gates at both ends.

(insert picture 1 and 2)

At the time of Jet's arrival, we had a harris hawk living in 2 of the aviaries, and 2 empty barred aviaries. There are also a couple of meshed aviaries in the corridor which we try to keep empty in case anyone is sick and needs to move offshow temporarily.

We decided to use 2 aviaries for Jet. One for him to live in, and one as a 'shift'. We actually made the shift dual purpose so that our Harris hawk could be moved into it during cleaning as he is not comfortable with us cleaning in the aviary with him. Tom cut holes in the sides of each aviary and built slides out of old offcuts and metal runners he found in the maintenance yard. Ok maybe they won't win any awards for the way they look, but they are functional and practical for sure. We attached padlocks to the slides on each side so there was no danger of anyone accidentally opening one and letting the two birds in together.

(insert picture 3)

In the shift aviary Tom built a table. We had a mesh panel installed which served as a great 'foot inspection platform' and also a way to teach Jet to allow us to turn on his telemetry which was mounted on a backpack. We also placed his box on this table. Despite the fact that the corridor was very close to the flying area, we box trained Jet almost immediately and started transporting him to different areas to fly. Luckily Paradise also own a large field which is rarely used, just outside the main zoo grounds and this is where we started his training.

Jet's aviary had a variety of perches including a traditional block, a couple of shelves and some branches. There was astroturf on the block and shelves, and in a couple of places on the branches.

(insert picture 4)

The foot platform came in handy quite early on when we noticed Jet had a pressure sore on one of his feet. Despite astroturf being on most of the surfaces, he had clearly found a place to sit which we had missed. We were able to treat his feet on this mesh platform and keep an eye on them daily, whilst also changing his perches and adding more astroturf.

Our routine became quite successful. We would enter the shift aviary and get the box ready, open the slide for Jet to come through, turn on his telemetry and ask him to go into his box and turn around for a treat. We would take him to a flying location (even if this was on the bird flying arena, we still boxed him to take him there), and let him out. Jet would bring himself out of the box and then jump on top of it while he chose a suitable route for his test flight.

Jet would take himself up to a building/sign post/anything high up to survey the area. Over time we were able to let him fly for longer to build up skill and stamina, gaining height, learning about thermals and 'being a falcon'. He is trained to the lure but from the very beginning we wanted a bird who would willingly jump off the lure after catching it, and bring himself back to us. So we trained him that he would get a piece of food on the lure for

catching it, and when he was finished he should look to us, we would give him another piece, away from the lure on the ground, giving us time to wrap up the lure without having to 'take it' from him. Then he would come up to the glove and be walked back towards the box.

(insert picture 5)

Pretty quickly Jet learned this routine and now, if he can see the box after he finishes his piece of food he will quite often take himself back to it and wait for us!

On returning to the shift aviary, Jet comes out of the box, stands for telemetry to be turned off and jumps back through the slide into his aviary for the rest of his food.

Just having this set up has been so very successful for us, and for him and we were so lucky to have had the space to build this shift aviary (and that Tom had the necessary building skills!).

So we had a free lofted falcon, with no anklets or jesses, flying free, no foot issues, doing great. Until we noticed he had broken a tail feather. Then another one, and another. This wasn't affecting his flying ability but we were confused because we couldn't work out why or how he was damaging his feathers. As far as we were aware, he wasn't bouncing around the aviary, there was nothing to injure himself on at all!

Then one day I was talking to a volunteer in the corridor and saw Jet, sat on one of the branches, with his tail splayed out over the astroturf and it all became clear; cue the next enclosure modification and poor Tom had another building project!

(insert picture 6)

We took down the branches (I say we, I mean, Tom...) and built new perches. These new perches are basically block perches, but attached to the walls, high up in the aviary so Jet can still see outside. Essentially a round disk, covered in astroturf, attached to the wall with wooden baton.

It took Jet 2 days to understand how to sit on them!!! But, once he figured it out, he has multiple perches to sit on, his tail has not suffered any further damage and he is still free lofted and flying free!

(insert picture 7)

There are a lot of falconers I have spoken to in the UK who are reluctant to free loft raptors because of them damaging their feathers. Up until Jet we hadn't seen feather damage in our free lofted birds because of the aviary set up we were using (something I know it not possible for everyone), but I always wondered if that would be enough to stop us from free lofting. Having watched Jet damage his feathers and it not affect his flight skills, and note that wild raptors often have damaged feathers and can still fly, I am pleased to say it did not change our minds. What it did though, was make us reconsider our antecedent arrangement. How else could we make it possible to still house this bird the way we wanted and the way he was now used to? A bit of creative thinking, some building work and a bit of adjustment on our part, and we succeeded. Isn't that what animal training is all about?

I hope this information helps any of you who are considering trying this, and maybe even inspires you to try something new. If you have any questions or want to see videos of him

shifting/having his telemetry turned on or off/box training or flying free, please email me nicky@shapingbehaviour.com.

Happy flying!