

The Power of Control; A Bird's Perspective

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Abstract

Control is always a hot topic in training from both our bosses, our non 'bird trainer' colleagues, and of course our guests....'Do you have control of that animal?' 'How do you stop that bird from flying away?' 'What happens if it doesn't come home?' 'Oh, it's only coming back to you because you've got all its food'.... I'm sure we are all familiar with fielding questions like these.

In the bird show environment, we often try to educate our visitors on how much we let the birds choose themselves (where it is safe to do so). At Paradise Wildlife Park our ethos is always to give the animal as much choice and control as possible during all their training, whether for husbandry or during shows. Each morning the birds are free to climb or fly onto the scales to obtain reinforcement and return to a station. During our bird shows we try to SHOW the visitors the birds are in control.

We do this in different ways depending on the species, but all our birds are able to fly out of their aviaries on cue, and return to them on their own, or to climb in and out for parrot species. Many of our birds fly routines to posts instead of to keepers' gloves/hands and several of them will do at least part of their routine with absolutely no keeper interaction. This gives the bird more choice to participate and allows more keepers to be able to fly the bird.

In part this is due to the location of our flying area and our aviaries but has still taken time to train. Since relinquishing some of the control keepers/managers felt they needed with the birds, we have overcome many hurdles and obstacles. We also have 2 non-flying parrots who are now able to join the show without having to go to a keeper – they do their whole routine themselves.

All our birds are housed free lofted in aviaries and we do not use anklets, jesses or tether any of our species. Of course, this has had its own challenges, but has meant we have needed to be more inventive as trainers and have had to brainstorm these challenges to ensure we are still using the 'most positive, least intrusive' (Dr Susan Friedman PhD) solution possible.

Essentially, we have learnt that taking a step back means our birds can take giant leaps forward!

I joined the team at Paradise Wildlife Park in 2012 where the bird section had been without leadership for about a year and a half. The section produced 2 free flight shows daily in addition to housing African penguins, but the section was short staffed and not necessarily a 'priority highlight' of the zoo, for managers, keepers, or visitors.

Instead of being disheartened by this, I decided to use the freedom available while the section was not in the spotlight to revolutionise the way we did, well, everything! This has been a challenging process but we are now in a position where we can show the results of this hard work with our whole bird collection, penguins included.

My intention is not to dwell on the past, or denigrate the staff before me so this paper will be about the positive changes we have made, enabling birds to take back their power and choose to participate in our shows. As everything is, it is still a work in progress and I brainstorm with

my team frequently to work out solutions to problems and think of ways to improve what we are doing year on year.

Every interaction we have with our animals teaches them something, even if we do not intend for it to be a formal training session. They are observing us so closely for any hints about what we might be doing or how they might obtain reinforcement from us in any moment.

We start our day by giving the birds the choice to be weighed – weight is such an important measure of health and can tell you so much about a bird in different conditions and different times of the year. We record this data but when it comes to flying the birds we ensure we are observing their behaviour and the environmental conditions as well.

Our birds are all free lofted in aviaries, and none wear anklets or jesses. This means they can all choose to climb onto or fly onto the scales themselves, and are reinforced once they have stationed after a weight is obtained, or back on our hand or glove.

When it comes to flying our birds free, the birds are all stationed as we approach the aviary and fly or climb out to the flying arena when cued to do so....the cue is the door opening and it is not opened until the bird is stationed appropriately.

Many of our routines are done at least partially with no keeper interaction, with flights being chained together. This gives the birds more choice to participate in the show and gives us chance to observe their behaviours – if they are hesitant to fly to a particular point we can try to work out why during the show.

All the birds exit themselves at the end of the routine on cue and as many as possible fly back through their doors themselves.

I am aware that this is something not possible in many show set ups – this strategy works for us at Paradise because our aviaries are located around the flying arena – this also has challenges with birds anticipating ‘their’ turn to fly, or visiting their neighbours, but we work to overcome these with an outcome which considers the welfare of the birds, staff and audience members.

By choosing to give all of our birds control over their participation in shows and training sessions we find we have huge success rates, and it teaches staff great observation skills and allows them to learn WITH the birds.