

Training a European Barn owl (*Tyto alba*) to circuit in a Busy Show Setting

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Background

Sophie, one of our European barn owls is nearly 17 years old. She has been at Paradise Wildlife Park since 2001. When I met her she was flying short glove to post or glove to glove flights and was very vocal. The screaming was inadvertently being reinforced by the keepers as she would scream while flying to the glove and then be fed on the glove therefore it was getting worse.

My first summer here we continued to fly her in this way, I started a week before the school holidays and so everything was rather chaotic! As the summer went on I realised there was a chance to showcase this bird, teach her new skills, and learn with her and my team a different way of flying a barn owl.

Objectives

My goal was to increase the amount of flying she did, increase her weight, her fitness and show the natural behaviour of her flying around the lawn, her buoyancy and aerodynamic performance coming across to the best of her ability. Barn owls are incredible to watch in the wild, most people never get the chance to see one, and so often in shows they are not flown in this manner, especially in the UK where there is a big emphasis on birds being as close as possible to people. This usually means they are held on the glove, or flown closely in front of them. I think you can try to create a balance. The bird shows its natural ability, flies as close as it chooses to the audience and people get to witness as close as possible to a wild barn owl flying past them.

The eventual goal was her have her fly ‘naked’ with no anklets or jesses since we never take them anyway, it seemed unnecessary to have them on her.

Initial Stages

Building fitness was the first thing we had to do. Years of doing maybe ten 6-8ft flights a day meant this was a rather large challenge at first. Sophie had learnt that when she didn’t want to fly anymore, she could just sit on a post and scream, and someone would go and pick her up and return her to the aviary. This was about to change! We worked on her fitness strategically by lengthening the flights she did from glove to glove, and by increasing her weight, food and the number of flights she did. We started this after she had moulted my first year at PWP. So in early 2013 we started increasing distance and getting her to fly all the way from her aviary to the lawn instead of being carried there and put on a fence. She would then fly between 2 keepers and back to her aviary.

By the summer we were able to start the circuit behaviour. The presenter stood on the lawn as if to call her, however slightly further back than previously. The presenter did not call her, as we did not want to 'trick' her into flying, however by now she had a long reinforcement history with flying to the presenter. As she flew towards the presenter, the person releasing her would whistle, using her recall cue to turn her back to them. By doing this, the first circuit was pretty easy to get, and that's how that summer was spent. A circuit followed by multiple long flights keeper to keeper.

We put all of our birds out to moult for several months each year, and as we drop a show over the winter it seemed logical to moult Sophie after the summer holidays and then start retraining again over the winter when we are quieter and have (slightly) more time.

2014

This was a big year for us! We got Sophie flying multiple sets of multiple circuits daily in our shows!

As with all behaviours, there are constant new challenges. Some of these were expected, some of them not so expected!

Unpredictable audience members, especially children, who liked to run towards me while I was calling Sophie, people with giant umbrellas (because..England), pushchairs (strollers) were all expected and could be managed most days without problems. The weather was not surprising – too hot and she got tired too easily, the rain (of which we have a lot) – is obvious, although she will fly in drizzle, luckily! Sophie flies AMAZINGLY well in the wind. For a 380g bird she has incredible control, sometimes goes really high, but always figures out how to get back down to us. This is a great way of showing how well they are adapted, using the wind to their advantage.

Maintenance and other staff were an unexpected challenge. The location of the flying arena is very close to our maintenance yard, and because previously she had flown in the reasonably secluded lawn only, it hadn't even occurred to me that this may cause us problems. Once she started circuiting, she was flying higher, and was able to see so much more of her surroundings. Those surroundings included workmen in terrifying high vis jackets, machinery and all sorts of equipment in the yard! To counter this I had to request that the maintenance team refrain from walking through the gate attached to the bird section during shows, and we have to radio and ask them to turn off any particularly loud or distracting machines before the shows. This did not really go down well....Fortunately for us, whenever Sophie has been spooked by this, she just flies a higher circuit – as long as we are watching her we can find the right moment to recall her, and almost use it to our advantage!

Landing on other areas – was a set-back, but not a problem. If she landed anywhere except for on my glove, that was of course entirely her choice. Usually it meant I had messed up on my timing – trying to get her to work a little harder each day to get a better standard of behaviour, but working her too hard and she was too tired. Occasionally this was weather

related, the conditions on the ground did not reflect those in the sky and I didn't realise how much harder it would be for her on those days. I learnt quickly, as did she.

If she landed on a tower or post, her reinforcement was the fact that she chose to land there. If she came back to the glove, her reinforcement was infinitely better (as proved by her stopping landing on things that weren't me almost entirely). Each and every time she was called back to the glove, she would receive small pieces of mice or chick. The pieces are cut very small, intentionally. Having tried to offer her larger pieces initially, I found this detrimental as she wanted to fly and land on a post to eat them. If I hand fed her 'bite size' chunks, I could vary the amount of pieces, and she would sit quite happily on the glove to eat. The number of pieces offered depended on her flights. The harder she worked, the more pieces she got. Defining how hard she worked took a little time, but I started counting the circuits she offered, judging the wind speed and how difficult it was for her to stay up, and if she threw in a direction change! These were all big paydays!! If she took off and just did one circuit before trying to come in, then she would only get 1 piece of food, therefore making it worth her while to stay in the air for longer.

At the end of the flying season in 2014, we removed her anklets and jesses. We did this just before putting her out to moult, while the behaviour we wanted was so set in her brain. We flew her 'naked' for about the last 2 weeks before putting her out to moult.

Training for the 2015 shows started at the end of 2014, and we didn't put anklets and jesses back on her, just started without them. She's a superstar!!! She flew right through until the end of this summer with no kit on at all. She moulted from September to November and is now back in shows, circuiting and ready for next summer!

Each year it has taken less time to retrain the behaviour, and in fact this year we had her training out of shows for about 2 weeks, before putting her back in. Of course like any animal (including us) she has bad days...usually she lets us know she is not feeling up for it by sitting at the back of the aviary instead of on her usual perch! In fact when she is sitting at the back as we start the show, I usually just scrap her, and try her later on in the day if she is looking ready to fly.

Future Plans

I am hoping the bird area will be refurbished in the next year or two. I would like to move the seating area around so we have a larger arena and more sky for the birds to use. This will mean that Sophie's flights can continue to get more complex, with altitude changes as well as direction changes. We are also currently training a common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*) to circuit, using what we have learnt from our work with Sophie.