

**The Parrot Athlete:  
Why you should let your bird fly for fitness and mental health.**

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Parrots are natural athletes. They move frequently and fluidly in their natural environment, using flight to find food, communicate with each other, play and evade predators. Flying for exercise is as natural to them as breathing air. Thus, any discussion of exercise and parrots must rightly include the consideration of flight.

For parrots in the wild, flight affords them more than a means to exercise. It gives them freedom of choice. They may go where they want, perch where they want and forage where they want. Flight provides for a full degree of social and emotional self-expression, as well as physical fitness. This type of freedom results in a quality of life that is difficult to match in captivity. One of the important questions for any parrot caregiver is this: How can we provide adequate exercise in our homes in a way that also makes some of that same freedom and self-expression possible?

While caregivers in the United States have historically considered it necessary to clip wings, companion parrots in other countries have not had their flight feathers so routinely trimmed. Feelings regarding the importance of flight for parrot companions have grown so strong that they are now reflected in some countries' animal welfare texts and laws.

According to parrot keeper and trainer Dagmar Heidebluth, the German Veterinary Association for Animal Protection issued a statement about "*Flugunfähig machen von Papageienvögeln*" (making parrot birds flightless) in April 2007, indicating that they strongly oppose any form of restricting a bird's ability to fly, including pinioning, clipping and the use of a harness. This further states that birds need their wings not only for flying but also for climbing, balancing and communicating with other birds, and that wing clipping can result in injuries and problem behavior.

Emelie Hultberg, a Swedish veterinary student, reports that a law has been passed just this year in Sweden that forbids wing clipping of any birds under the age of one year so that they have the ability to learn to fly. Flight ability in adult birds may be limited, but only if the individual parrot cannot be trained to use a flight harness. In these cases, the wings may be trimmed once a year in order to provide for safe transfer into an outdoor aviary in the warmer months, which is another common practice.

Australian behavior consultant Jim McKendry writes on the World Parrot Trust website ([parrots.org](http://parrots.org)) the following about wing clipping: "If we are genuine and authentic about promoting relationships with parrots as pets built on a foundation of respect, trust and appreciation for accommodating them to the best of our abilities, then such decisions should be made in the primary interest of what is ultimately the best for the bird – not simply to cater for the limitations of the owner's environmental circumstance. A 21st century approach to companion parrot care embraces their flight capability and challenges owners to develop both the appropriate training skills to manage that successfully and to create an appropriate environment to ensure that flight is catered for safely."

Given that the practice of keeping flighted parrots is routine in other countries, to the point of being protected under law, it is time that we in the United States ask ourselves some questions. Should wing clipping still be considered the best option for all parrots? Or should each caregiver and parrot be evaluated individually in regard to this issue? Can flight really be allowed safely within the home? If so, how do we go about providing that opportunity?

Physical safety for the bird is the argument most widely given for wing clipping, and a great deal has been written about the dangers that exist in the home for parrots that can fly. However, caregivers describe other benefits to keeping wings clipped as well. Clipped birds may be more compliant when it comes to stepping onto the hand or going back into the cage. Other people report that their parrot has a better "attitude" and is less likely to bite when flight feathers are trimmed. Further, clipped parrots

generally make less mess and have less opportunity to destroy personal possessions because of their lack of mobility.

Throughout the last four decades, I have lived with both clipped and flighted parrots. In the beginning, I clipped my companion birds because of the advice of others, and I saw no ill effects. However, my experience in breeding African Grey parrots provided a new awareness. On the advice of my mentor, breeder and behavior consultant Phoebe Linden, I allowed the babies to fledge and develop good flight skills before I gradually clipped their wings back prior to sending them to their new homes.

I saw firsthand the gains that this experience provided them; I watched the development of both coordination and confidence. I observed them as they learned to think while flying and to make decisions on the wing about where they wanted to go and how they would land. I began to question the necessity of clipping wings and became a strong advocate for fledging all baby parrots regardless of whether they would live as clipped birds or enjoy flight into adulthood.

For the last two decades, I have not clipped flight feathers, and all of my companion parrots have enjoyed full flight indoors. I am convinced flighted parrots enjoy a greater quality of life, experiencing both better physical and emotional health. They are also more enjoyable as companions, being better able to express themselves through movement. This hands-on experience has also convinced me that the dangers so often described when discussing the option of flight are not wholly valid. I suspect that much of what has been written was done so by those without firsthand knowledge gained from actually living with flighted parrots.

While risks do most certainly exist, they can, in most cases, be managed effectively through careful arrangement of the environment. Concerns about compliance are easily put to rest through the effective use of positive reinforcement. Birds, like all creatures, behave in order to get what they want. By rewarding the behaviors of stepping up and going back into the cage with a valuable treat, it is quite easy to maintain compliance.

### **Assessing the Caregiver and Environment**

This lifestyle is not for everyone, however, and I would never suggest that all adult parrots should be allowed to grow out their flight feathers. The decision to do so must be made carefully, giving full consideration to all factors. It is necessary to assess the parrot, the caregiver and the home. For those interested in exploring this option, many questions must be answered:

1. Am I able to set up a double-entry system or otherwise secure my home to prevent accidental loss outdoors?
2. Is everyone who lives here dependable, and can they keep doors closed and ceiling fans turned off?
3. Are there other animals that might pose harm to a parrot that gets too close?
4. Am I willing to learn how to use positive reinforcement techniques to reward desirable behavior to ensure that my parrot steps up when I ask him to instead of flying away?
5. Am I willing to provide an outdoor aviary so that my parrot can get used to the sights and sounds of the outdoors, thereby making it less likely that he will startle and fly far away in the case of loss?

### **Assessing the Parrot**

Assessing the parrot is more complicated. Some parrots are good candidates for flight, and others are not. The best candidates are young parrots that learn to fly well before having their wings clipped. They rediscover their flight skills with little trouble. Light-bodied parrots with long tails, such as cockatiels and

conures, often learn to fly more easily than heavy-bodied parrots, such as Amazons. Smaller cockatoos, which tend to be more active by nature, often learn more easily than some others as well.

Poor candidates are those who never learned to fly when young and who have had their flight feathers clipped for several years. These birds typically will not fly even if you stop clipping their flight feathers. They have developed a sedentary lifestyle and no longer feel that urge to take wing. Flying is too difficult at this stage, and they don't enjoy it. In most of these cases, it may be best to continue to keep these parrots with clipped flight feathers.

Size is another important issue. Smaller parrots, such as parrotlets or budgerigars, may be more at risk if allowed flight, simply due to their size. Special precautions must be taken for them. Flight for very large parrots living in small spaces might also not be practical.

If you would like to investigate more about whether flight might be an option for your parrot, I suggest contacting a parrot behavior professional with experience in this area. Such a consultant would be able to help you assess whether your bird is a suitable candidate, advise how best to set up the physical environment and assist with the necessary training. Living with a flighted parrot is a definite lifestyle change, and professional guidance will not only serve to keep your bird safer, but it will make the transition easier and more enjoyable for you.

### **If Flight is Not an Option**

If flight is not an option for your parrot at this time, there are still many valuable ways to encourage movement. Birds experience the same benefits from exercise that we do – improved cardiovascular health, a decrease in body fat, increased coordination and muscle mass, and an improved sense of well-being. Any and all methods to get a parrot moving should be provided.

First, it's helpful to examine how parrots move in the wild. While many spend time climbing, they primarily move in a lateral manner. They also enjoy perching at the top of vertical branches, as well as on branches that are angled. They land on small branches that bounce up and down. They make full use of a varied and complex physical environment. Moving in all these ways comes as second nature, even to companion parrots that have never been outdoors.

Whenever we want a parrot to do something, we must ask ourselves, "Why should he?" This is an important consideration when setting up an environment that will best encourage movement. If we provide a cage and alternate perches that encourage all those different types of movement and make moving about rewarding, we will have a parrot that enjoys exercising.

Arrange the environment and the daily schedule to encourage movement. Provide as large a cage as possible, making sure that it is wider than it is taller. This will encourage lateral movement. Locate food and water dishes in spots that require the parrot to move back and forth to forage. Additional dishes can easily be added to cages that have bars, making it possible to create multiple feeding stations. The daily diet can be divided between these dishes. Place foraging toys strategically just out of reach, so that your parrot has to work a bit to get to them.

Ensure that your parrot has at least three to four hours out of the cage each day. Most parrots don't flap their wings when inside their cages despite the often-quoted advice to provide a cage large enough to allow for this. Parrots need that time out in order to think about where they might want to move. Try to divide this time into two periods, one in the morning and one in the evening.

In addition to the cage, provide multiple perching options around the house. Parrots need a change of location and perspective, and a perch in every room is a great way to provide for that. Move your parrot about the house as you do so. By providing them with perches that elicit their interest and encourage them to move as they would in the wild, they will naturally choose to move about even without much encouragement from you.

Many perches naturally encourage exercise due to their design. Coiled rope perches, known originally as “Boings,” are a great choice for hanging from your ceiling. If hung on a swivel hook, these bounce and spin and encourage flapping. Climbing nets, also called cargo nets, encourage climbing, especially when “decorated” with small toys and foraging opportunities. Free-standing play gyms, with places to hang toys, will provide opportunity for climbing also.

Many caregivers have gone “all out” by creating a complex play area that hangs from the ceiling and incorporates ropes, ladders, nets, baskets and swings. Providing an outdoor aviary is another excellent idea. Parrots often move about more when outdoors, stimulated by fresh air and sunshine.

In addition to setting up a stimulating environment that will make it fun for your parrot to move about, you can also help to encourage exercise. The most obvious method is to teach your parrot to flap. It is often suggested that the caregiver hold the parrot on his hand and then drop the hand in order to make the parrot flap his wings. This approach scares many parrots and may break trust with the caregiver. A parrot should be able to sit on the hand without fear that it will suddenly drop out from beneath him.

Even if a signal is established that alerts the parrot about what to expect, this is forced exercise about which the parrot has no choice, so be sure that he is actually enjoying this before continuing. The goal should be to get the parrot to want to flap. If you have to drop your arm every time to get the parrot to flap, this is a sure sign that he’s not enjoying the experience. Once you have dropped your arm the first time, you should see him choose to continue to flap. I personally do not advocate this approach.

Often getting an older parrot to flap can be difficult. Parrots who have clipped wings do not enjoy flapping them as much as those who have full wings. It feels different to them, and depending upon the wing trim, flapping can make a parrot feel off-balance.

If you happen to have a parrot that does voluntarily flap his wings at times, then this behavior can be captured and rewarded. Rewarding a behavior with something the parrot values highly will ensure that the parrot performs that behavior more often in the future. Watch for your parrot to begin flapping, tell him “Good!” and walk over to offer a highly valued treat. The coiled rope perches mentioned above also encourage a parrot to flap. As he does so, the perch spins, which encourages even more flapping.

There are other good ways to encourage wing flapping as well. Try having the parrot stand on the back of a rocking chair with a towel or other item over the top to provide for a good grip and then gently rock the chair back and forth. This movement will also strengthen legs, ankles and feet, and results in better balance. Begin slowly and offer treats frequently to make this a positive experience. Make sure that you don’t push him past his limits. If he gets too winded or tends to lose his balance, this will not be an enjoyable activity for him. His stamina and abilities will grow over time. Take your cues from him.

Bathing also can be an aerobic activity. Many parrots flap when bathing. For these birds, offer a shower on a daily basis if possible. Small birds can often be encouraged to bathe by providing wet leafy greens inside a dish or tied to the side of the cage.

Music often encourages movement. Put on some music with a good beat and encourage your parrot to dance. Most parrots will naturally move to the beat, especially if you join in. Dancing with the bird on your hand can be fun for you both.

Some parrots enjoy chasing a whiffle ball or piece of crushed paper. Begin slowly with this activity to make sure he understands what to do. Offer the ball to the parrot, and when he takes it, show him a treat. He’ll drop the ball in order to get the treat. After a few repetitions of this, place the ball an inch away and encourage him to pick it up. Gradually, you can extend the distance he must travel in order to get the ball. Always reward each time with a small food treat.

Are you interested in training? If so, teach your parrot to target. This is simply the activity of touching his beak to a small target, such as a chopstick. If this is a new concept for you, trainer Barbara Heidenreich’s DVD, *Parrot Behavior and Training*, will be an excellent resource. Once your parrot knows how to target, you can teach him to climb stairs, ropes or ladders for exercise. Having learned that touching the target will earn a reward, he will follow it in order to do so.

A healthy, active parrot will be a more enjoyable parrot that is less likely to develop behavior problems. With a little time, expense and ingenuity, you can set up your bird's environment in such a way that he wants to move. When he does, reward him. You will soon have a parrot that lives to move.

### **Side Bar: Pros and Cons of Allowing Flight in the Home**

#### **Pros:**

- Better respiratory and cardiovascular health.
- Greater confidence. Parrots that can fly interact with their environment in such a way that results in increased confidence.
- Greater coordination due to stronger muscle development.
- Greater capabilities. Flying leads to thinking, which leads to greater brain development.
- Fewer behavior problems. Flighted parrots remain in the "to-do" mode throughout the day and are less likely to develop problems with biting, screaming or feather destructive behavior.
- Greater independence. Flighted parrots are less likely to develop overly dependent bonds with the caregiver, which often result in aggression toward others.
- Flighted parrots seem to cope better with, and adapt more successfully to, the limitations of the captive environment.
- Early detection of illness. When parrots choose to move often, it is easy to spot decreased movement.
- Flighted parrots are more fun because of their ability to express themselves socially.
- Ability to make more choices—freedom of movement to change location at will.
- Caregivers are forced to interact with their parrots in a more-effective manner or compliance is lost.
- Parrots with good flight skills may be more easily recovered if they do fly out the door.

#### **Cons:**

- Flighted parrots have more access to possessions, and "bird proofing" the home is mandatory.
- Parrots can carry their food around with them and create more of a mess.
- Injuries may occur to other parrots if individuals do not get along.
- There is the need to establish and always use a double-entry system
- Vacations may become more difficult because it is necessary to identify a caregiver who can manage a flighted parrot.
- Accidents can occur during moments of inattention – ceiling fans, open doors, hot stoves and wood-burning fireplaces can pose hazards.
- Compliance may become an issue if the caregiver does not reward cued behaviors.

Please do consider the option of flight for your companion parrot, especially if this is a young bird! A parrot consultant with experience in living with flighted parrots can easily help you to make the decision and then implement the plan.