



COMPANION PARROTS AND FLIGHT

Part Four: To Clip or Not to Clip?

The previous three episodes of this blog examined all of the reasons why allowing flight must be thoroughly considered before any decision to clip wings is made – in each and every case. Flight is the very best choice for physical and psychological health for the parrot and offers many benefits to the caregiver as well.



Courtesy of Siljan Nicholaisen

In a perfect world, all baby parrots would be parent-raised, fully fledged, and *never* have their wings clipped. In a perfect world, no one would adopt a parrot unless they could keep the bird fully flighted. However, this is not a perfect world.

The complicated lives of the complicated people who live with complicated parrots can make this decision a challenging one for those who have embraced wing clipping in the past. In addition to that, not every adult parrot is a good candidate for flight. This blog will take a look at how one goes about deciding this crucial question: “Is allowing flight the right choice for me and my parrot?”

It's a Study of One



Careful consideration must be given to all aspects and all projected consequences of each option. Many questions must be asked and answered about the home environment, the family, and the parrot. When owners take the time to do a thorough analysis, the choice then can be made with confidence.

If we decide to clip those flight feathers, we may regret the need, but we will rest confidently in the knowledge that the choice is the right one, because the other has been thoroughly researched and found impossible. If we decide to allow flight, our commitment to this will be complete and this will serve us well as prepare to live with a bird who flies.

Each parrot and his environment are a study of one.

Assessing the Environment

Not every home can safely accommodate a fully flighted parrot. Future episodes of this blog will deliver specific recommendations for how to live safely and successfully with birds who fly. Today, we will merely take a look at some of the considerations necessary to making a decision.



Can you secure your home by arranging your entrances and exits in such a way that the parrot cannot be lost if he chooses to fly to you? Companion parrots will rarely fly out an open door without reason. They are typically afraid of the unfamiliar and will not consciously make a decision to leave the familiarity of the home for the strangeness of the outdoors.

They are most frequently lost when they try to join *us* as we leave or enter the home. Especially at risk are parrots who have gotten used to hanging out on shoulders. When we open a door to either enter or exit the home, a flighted parrot will often try to join us. Hitting the shoulder at the same moment that we open the door often provides that perfect instant of startle when they instead fly off out the door. Having a double-entry system will prevent this.

Family Members and Visitors



Are all family members reliable, in terms of keeping doors shut and remaining mindful about the use of ceiling fans and other hazards? If you have several small children around, the danger of loss could increase if doors are constantly being left open. Yours may be 100% reliable, while their friends may not. Living with parrots might need to wait until they are older.

It doesn't do a bird much good to be flighted if he spends the majority of each day in his cage for safety's sake.

Even adult visitors will need monitoring. One African grey loved to fly in a circuit around the living area. There was a sliding glass door between two of the rooms that was always left open... until a well-meaning visitor closed it and a tragedy occurred. Dangers must be anticipated and prevented, which requires constant mindfulness.

An Outdoor Aviary?



Photo courtesy of Nyla Copp

Is there room for an outdoor aviary or screened-in porch and are you willing to go to the expense and inconvenience of providing such a safe space out-of-doors? Aside from the fact that parrots need exposure to real sunlight for health, a flighted parrot will be safest if he is exposed regularly to the sights and sounds of your neighborhood. In the event of loss, this familiarity can keep him from startling and flying too far away for recovery.

Other Pets

Are there other animals in the home who might pose a danger? Most cats are not much of a risk to medium- to large-sized parrots, but will absolutely be attracted to the manner in which small birds fly.



Dogs with a prey drive may well leap up to catch a flighted parrot, but leave a perched bird alone. Dogs (and possibly some cats) can be trained a “leave it” cue, but this would require a good degree of training skill and persistent effort on your part.

Occasionally one parrot will develop aggressive behavior toward another. Training can resolve this situation as well, but in rare cases it could be best for everyone's safety to perform a partial clip until such training is well under way. It is not typically necessary to perform a full wing clip to solve this problem temporarily. Removing about 1.5 inches of length from the first two or three leading primary flight feathers makes it more difficult to fly, which generally leads to a drastic reduction in such aggressive behavior.

Assessing Ourselves

As much as we might like to think that we are good candidates for living with a flighted parrot, not all of us are. We must honestly assess ourselves, as well.



Am I interested in training my bird and am I willing to devote the time to learn how? As I stated in my last blog post about the [benefits of flight to caregivers](#), clipping wings and training are two sides of the same coin. (In reality of course, clipped birds need training too.) While clipping wings may accomplish a measure of compliance, you have no such advantage with a flighted companion. Reinforcing cued behaviors to maintain compliance and teaching a recall behavior are essential.

Training birds is fun, results in better relationships, and doesn't take more than a few minutes each day. But, if you are unfamiliar with effective training strategies, this will require study, planning and preparation. If you feel that your life is out of control and you lose your keys once a week, it might not be the right time to live with birds who fly.

An Inconvenient Truth



Are you willing to tolerate some damage to household items? This should be minimal if you set up the house correctly and work on behavioral management. However, it will still happen.

Parrots often change their behavior as they get older and we will at times be absent-minded. How many remote controls are you willing to replace? Is it important enough to you to allow your bird flight to put up with the occasional need to repair woodwork or replace closet doors (as a real-life example)?

Parrot Perches



Photo courtesy of David Hull

Parrots need their own “furniture.” For flighted birds, this is essential. Since they can go where they want, they will use yours if they don’t have their own. To me, there is no greater frustration than watching a parrot perch on a bookcase and chew the spines of my beloved books.

Setting up an appropriate environment for flighted birds will remove your home a few steps from Martha Stewart standards. Can you make peace with this?

Assessing the Parrot

Not every adult parrot is a good candidate for flight.



First, any decision to clip wings should *never* be made for the purpose of correcting behavior problems. It was common, when I was working as a veterinary technician, for a client to come in stating that she wanted her birds wings clipped because he was becoming “uppity.” In other words, the owner wanted the clip for the purpose of making the parrot feel *less safe* so that he would be more compliant. This is not ethical. “Uppity behavior,” and any other problems, can be addressed through training – using positive reinforcement effectively, coupled with thoughtful arrangement of the environment. *If you have a behavior problem, please call me for a consultation before you think about clipping wings.*

Fully Flighted = Excellent Skills

In regards to the parrot himself, any decision to clip should be based upon safety considerations. Many older parrots will not learn to fly even if you allow their flight feathers to grow out. This creates a dangerous situation.

A bird with *flight capability*, but who lacks *flight skills*, is at greater risk of both physical injury and permanent loss than the parrot who practices flying regularly. Most of the accidents and injuries that are touted as reasons for clipping have occurred because of limited or nonexistent skills.



It is also too easy to imagine that the bird who doesn’t fly... can’t or won’t fly. These birds are regularly lost when owners take them outside on shoulders or perches, imagining that they will never fly off. All it takes is a startle, generating a spurt of adrenaline, a bit of breeze, and that bird

is gone. Sadly then, he is often lost for good since he doesn't have the skills to keep himself safe and then fly back.

If you are going to allow your parrot to keep his flight feathers, it is crucial that he uses them to fly as his primary means of getting around. Only in this way will he develop the skills he needs. Fully flighted parrots must develop stamina, the ability to maneuver in tight places, and to fly upward and downward at steep inclines. This will make their recovery more certain if they are ever lost outside.

Evaluating Candidates



Great candidates for the recovery of flight are those young parrots who were fledged well by the breeder, but then had their wings clipped before adoption. Typically, once they molt for the first time they regain flight easily. Unfortunately these days in the United States, breeders who fledge babies are rare.

Young parrots who never fledged, but who are allowed to retain flight feathers after the first molt, often also learn to fly well. That instinct to fly usually remains for at least a year after clipping. These individuals may need a little encouragement, but can still become great flyers.

Evaluating older parrots for flight can be difficult. I remember one conversation I had with Barbara Heidenreich and Chris Shank on this topic. We agreed that a heavy-bodied bird who had

been clipped for eight years or longer is not likely to regain flight and would be a poor candidate. Exceptions exist, however.

Parrots with long tails (cockatiels, conures, macaws, etc) are often described as “light-bodied.” These individuals may be more likely to regain flight, even after a few years of clipping. Parrots with short tails (Amazons, caiques, African greys, etc) are termed “heavy-bodied” and often have a harder time learning to fly later.

For these birds, initial attempts at flight are not reinforcing. Flying is too hard and they frequently decide that it is not worth the effort, especially if they have been clipped for long enough that they have lost that urge to change location frequently that is a hallmark of the parrot spirit.

Small cockatoos do frequently regain flight, even after an extended period of clipped wings. Their dynamic, sprightly personalities seem to provide them with more drive for frequent activity. In addition, they tend to have wider wing spans in relation to their body size than other species do, which makes those early attempts less punishing.

Get a Mentor to Ensure Success

I strongly encourage you to engage the services of a mentor if you do decide to allow your clipped parrot to regain flight. It can be invaluable to speak with an experienced advocate who will evaluate your home for dangers, help you set up the correct environment, and provide you with the training knowledge you need.



Photo courtesy of Chris Shank

I've never yet talked to anyone who regretted the decision to allow flight. It's an emotional experience that words struggle to convey. The rewards so far outweigh the inconvenience. It's akin to touching the wildish heart of the natural world.

Please stay tuned for the next episode of this series, which will provide information on living successfully with flighted birds, including setting up your home and the necessary training.

Thank you for reading my blog. I am Pamela Clark, an IAABC Certified Parrot Behavior Consultant. My passion is helping people with parrots by offering behavior consultations and

publishing information you can trust. To access free resources or subscribe to my newsletter (which is a different publication from this blog), please visit me at <http://www.pamelaclarkonline.com>. Until next time!