

Whether to Tether: Promoting Empowerment by Free-lofting Raptors

Kristin Dean, Colleen Roddick *CPBT-KA*

Carolina Raptor Center

ABSTRACT

Tethering has been used as a training tool for centuries to allow safe and quick handling of raptors. As the industry pushes towards providing ambassador animals with more empowerment, we take a closer look at why this practice is still in use, and if there are less intrusive methods available to yield the same result. This paper will discuss the possible implications of tethering raptors inside enclosures and how our facility has avoided this practice by finding training alternatives to improve the welfare of our birds. Eliminating this process may allow us to strengthen relationships with ambassador raptors by creating an environment more conducive to choice.

CAROLINA RAPTOR CENTER BACKGROUND

Carolina Raptor Center (CRC) was established in 1981 as a non-profit 501(c)3 organization dedicated to the conservation of birds of prey through rehabilitation and education. We have 82 raptors and birds of prey in our permanent collection, which includes 36 species and 5 orders. Our education staff see over 40,000 kids a year through formal and informal programming.

Our standards for education birds have changed throughout the years. Within the past 5 years we have phased out many birds who were previously thought to be good candidates. These birds did not have the right disposition, history etc. to be ethically used for programming.

Historically, tethering has not been a common practice at our facility. In the past, a weathering area was utilized for educational programming, but tethering has been very rarely employed as a training tool.

INTRODUCTION

The practice of tethering has been used for centuries on raptors and has deep roots in falconry. Tethering is the use of anklets in combination with a swivel and leash, that is attached to a stationary object. Tethering is frequently used inside mews for many reasons. It is used to facilitate training, to keep trainers safe, and to prevent birds from injury. As better practices arise in the wildlife and zoological field, this method should be carefully evaluated.

Bird training has evolved to committing to the most positive and least intrusive methods. According to Dr. Susan Friedman, "Intrusiveness refers to the degree to which the learner

has counter control” (2014). This has pushed us to consider whether tethering is an ethical practice. By limiting the movement of raptors, trainers can more easily approach a bird to initiate a training session. However, the birds are unable to escape and may not be active participants.

Animals are more likely to become willing participants when they have power over their environment. “Control is inheritably a behavior strengthening consequence” (Martin 2017) and by providing animals with more opportunities to make decisions, it is possible to improve animal welfare and form stronger bonds between teacher and learner.

The alternative to tethering is free-lofting. “Free-lofting refers to housing a bird untethered inside a closed space such as a cage or mew” (IAATE 2015). In this situation, the bird can be taught to actively participate in its training while free from restraints.

LIMITING OPPORTUNITY FOR EMPOWERMENT

In the hierarchy of behavior-change procedures, positive punishment is the most intrusive training method. Tethering can be interpreted as positive punishment. When a trainer approaches a raptor and it chooses to fly away, the tether jerks or pulls on the raptor’s legs. This serves to reduce the behavior of moving away from the trainer. Punishment has many harmful side effects such as; escape or avoidance, increased aggression, apathy, and generalized fear. This form of dominance training and trainer control attitude directly opposes ideals concerning freedom of choice.

During a training session, a tethered raptor may try to escape or avoid the situation or trainer. After multiple escape attempts, trainers may see a once “feisty” or “energetic” bird become more “subdued” or “calm” and attribute it to their training methods. Although this may seem successful to the trainer (they got the bird on their glove), internally the bird may be experiencing a phenomenon known as learned helplessness. Dr. Friedman discusses learned helplessness in “What’s wrong with this picture? Effectiveness is not enough”. She states that when an animal’s attempts to escape aversive stimulus are blocked, they tend to give up trying even when their power to escape is restored. The blocking of responses can be associated with declined emotional and immune system activity (2014). Could tethering damage future training sessions or relationships with trainers?

According to Steve Martin, when an animal is restrained, it can lose their motivation to participate in training. When an animal can leave, it is more likely to stay (2017). When a bird bates from a perch (much like bating from a glove), it experiences a loss of control. Control is a primary reinforcer, much like food, shelter, and water. Giving the bird more control or choice, can lead to a more conducive learning environment. Many facilities have utilized empowerment by changing training methods to become more “force free”. Some facilities have removed anklets and jesses from birds in free flight shows and now release birds directly out of their enclosures. Trainers have even discovered new tactics to

train mixed species in large aviaries. The direction avian training is going is incredible, and we should apply these ideas of empowerment to all aspects of raptor training. The goal of trainers should be to find the least intrusive method possible and continually look to improve on animal welfare.

Tethering is not a technique commonly used for birds other than raptors. Raptors are equipped with powerful legs and feet, and for this reason are able to physically withstand the pull of a tether. Through speciesism, raptors are often tethered without the consideration of their individuality. Speciesism is the assignment of different values, rights, or special considerations, to individuals solely on the basis of their species membership. When we train other bird species, why is tethering not used as a method of training? Is it solely because their legs can't withstand it, or is it because there are better methods available?

INPUT EQUALS OUTPUT!

The training of free-lofted raptors can be very complex and time consuming. For this reason, facilities may use tethering for ease and convenience. When a bird is tethered to a perch, it's easy to transfer the leash into a glove and remove them from the enclosure. Since this technique requires little skill, there can be many trainers that are able to handle an individual bird. Facilities don't have to rely on the consistency or experience level of trainers or the reliability of their birds to accomplish organizational needs. Although many facilities feel that it is an effective method of training, is it ethical? Does this result in birds experiencing learned helplessness? By putting more effort into our training we may get more reliable and "happier" birds.

We believe the following is key for a successful training program with free-lofted raptors:

Troubleshooting

Since each bird is an individual, each training plan is unique. Much of our technique is to troubleshoot with each bird to see what works for them. In the beginning stages of training, we reinforce for calm behavior, and sometimes use an "approach and retreat" method. We want to ensure that we are moving at the bird's pace, and giving them enough space to build a foundation of trust without flooding them.

It's also important to consider the antecedent arrangement. Sometimes we have found that moving a bird to a different enclosure has allowed us to see improved results in their training. The new location could provide for more or less foot traffic, tree cover, etc. We can also alter size of the enclosure, add meshing, perching options, and give them more choice to get away from human interaction if they choose.

Consistency

Consistency in the training of raptors is critical for success. Consistency allows us to strengthen relationships and is the foundation for reliable behaviors. At CRC we have 5 full-time staff members that work with our 41 outreach ambassador raptors/birds of prey. Staff members have a bird “team” that they are responsible for. Bird teams consist of anywhere from ~ 6-10 birds, leaving each bird to have only one primary and secondary trainer. These birds are worked daily to maintain their reliability for programming and husbandry. We’ve organized these teams to allow trainers to have a backup for programs. This flexibility empowers our birds to say “no” and we can easily adapt.

Skillset of Trainers

Successful training requires a high level of skill and knowledge. Our bird care staff have backgrounds in animal related fields and regularly participate in professional development. As the industry evolves, we continue to reevaluate our practices in all aspects of avian care, including the training of our ambassador raptors. Previously we had staff from other departments as well as many volunteers handle our raptors. We have transitioned to having only essential bird care staff handle. In 2012 we phased out the handling by other staff and in 2018 we eliminated our volunteer handling program. This does not necessarily mean that these handlers were incapable, but volunteers and non-essential staff do not always have a background in a scientific field and are unable to devote the time or training necessary to maintain reliable behaviors.

TRAINER SAFETY

In our experience, we’ve noticed that some trainers believe raptors to be aggressive and result to tethering for trainer safety. We don’t believe that raptors are inherently more aggressive than other birds. In general, any animal may display aggressive behaviors when they are fearful, overly motivated, or there is poor communication from the trainer.

By responding to “non-aggressive” signals, we can often prevent the larger, more obvious behavior from occurring. Raptors can indicate their discomfort by showing small changes in behavior that may lead to flying at a trainer, footing their hand etc. Subtle behaviors leading up to aggression could include feather changes, posture, eye constricting/dilating, or vocalizations. Each bird is an individual and will communicate differently. We must observe and respond by modifying our own behavior. Analyzing each situation on a case by case basis is critical to understand the underlying cause of the behavior. Is the act of flying at a trainer due to actual “aggression” or are we labeling their behavior?

The behavior of flying towards a trainer can also be caused by; extreme motivation, unhealthy weight, lack of trust with the trainer, or it could be a learned behavior from unintentional reinforcement. If a bird is too motivated or at an unhealthy weight, we ask

if it is possible to work that bird at a higher weight, or give them a small meal before a training session to encourage “calm” behavior.

It’s also important to move at the bird’s pace and take the time needed to build a foundation of trust. Enclosure design can aid in this by giving them the opportunity to say “no”. Birds should have enough space and perching for them to escape if they do not want to participate. Along with this, we must consider what behaviors are being reinforced. Every interaction with a bird is a training session. If we toss food when a bird is flying, are we reinforcing the behavior of flying towards us or at the side of the enclosure? If this is a learned behavior, can we train them to station at another location or reinforce for “calm” behavior?

PREVENTING BIRD INJURY

Flying at the sides of an enclosure can be dangerous to the health of the bird. Many facilities tether their birds for this reason. If a bird is continually flying into a wall, it can result in broken feathers and injuries to the cere, wrists, and feet. A bird may fly at a wall when it is attempting to fly at a trainer for some of the reasons listed previously, but may also fly at a wall in an attempt to escape the situation.

The same principles apply when interpreting this behavior, but the behaviors displayed might be more in line with escape/avoidance. Subtle behaviors such as eye/head movements, crouching, and slicking of feathers in preparation of flight can be early indicators that a bird is looking for an escape. We have found that giving these birds their space and control of their environment has minimized instances in which they injure themselves. Sometimes we are able to give more perching options that they will choose to fly to. When they learn that we will respect their space on those perches, they use them more often than choosing to go into a wall. We can also move birds to larger enclosures to prevent them from feeling trapped. If at all necessary, we can change materials out and refit the enclosure to prevent injury.

CONCLUSION

As the industry evolves, we should continue to reevaluate our practices in all aspects of avian care and ensure that our birds have the best welfare possible. Trainers should strive to use the most positive and least intrusive approach when training. In our opinion, tethering is extremely intrusive and can have many adverse implications. By free lofting raptors, we can empower our birds and create an environment more conducive to choice. We can strengthen relationships by setting a foundation of trust, resulting in more reliable ambassadors. There are many alternatives to tethering and it is our responsibility as caretakers to explore these options and determine best practice in the industry.

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