



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

TETHERING BIRDS

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BACKGROUND

Tethering is a management practice typically used with raptor species. It involves the application of jesses and soft leather anklets around the legs of the bird. To prevent entanglement, the jesses are connected to a swivel which is then connected to the leash. Some facilities also use a jess extender between the jesses and the swivel to provide an extra measure for preventing entanglement. The leash is then attached to a stationary object such as a heavy perch in a manner that allows the bird freedom of movement between perching, bath pans, and the ground. When used appropriately a tethered bird is limited in the distance it can go from the stationary object, however the bird also maintains freedom of movement to comfortably preen, eat, bathe, extend its wings, flap, etc. Appropriate use also includes protecting tethered birds from the elements, intruders, predators, and other tethered birds in the vicinity.

POSITION

IAATE recognizes that there are a wide variety of practices used to manage education program birds. IAATE supports management practices that have proven to be safe for the birds and trainers, provide for the health and welfare of the birds, facilitate training and educational goals, and demonstrate optimum care for the birds in a given situation. The management practice of tethering raptors is safe when applied appropriately. This is evidenced by the successful use of tethering in falconry for over 2000 years. Respected Avian Veterinary Specialist Dr Pat Redig of the University of Minnesota Raptor Center reports that tethering raptors rarely causes adverse medical effects.

IAATE supports both tethering and free-lofting as appropriate management practices for raptors. Flight is an energy depleting activity that serves specific purposes in the wild. Therefore, it is not an activity performed frivolously. Raptors in the wild fly to patrol territories, seek out food, secure mates, etc. When these needs are met, their flight behavior decreases. Similarly, in captivity, free-lofted raptors choose to spend a majority of their time sitting on perches instead of flying. The evaluation of whether to use free-lofting, tethering, or a combination of both should be ongoing and based on the behavioral responses of the bird and its physical health.

IAATE supports tethering raptor species such as hawks, eagles, owls, falcons, etc. and recommends against tethering non-raptor species. Raptors are powerful predators with strong legs designed to withstand the physical stress of hunting and capturing prey and rarely suffer ill effects from tethering. Non-raptor species are more prone to injury when tethered. Additionally, tethering some species, such as vultures, caracaras, and other birds which spend more time walking, exploring, or biting equipment should be evaluated on a case by case basis.

IAATE recommends that all tethered birds be monitored throughout the day to ensure their health and safety.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION STATEMENT

Tethering is an effective management tool, providing advantages in the following areas:

Housing:

Birds that may not have access to an outdoor area in their permanent enclosures can be exposed to beneficial natural elements without needing much space. This is important for the health and welfare of the birds.

Stress Reduction:

When approached during training, some free-lofted raptors may exhibit behaviors commonly associated with stress, such as panicked flight. In these situations some trainers choose to chase and/or manually restrain their birds, which can be stressful and harmful to a bird. When a raptor is tethered, the trainer has a better opportunity to approach and offer positive reinforcement which can lead to quicker desensitization.

Safety to Trainers:

Free-lofted raptors, particularly human imprinted birds, can become territorially aggressive. When a free-lofted raptor is displaying aggressive behavior there are few, if any, opportunities to reinforce calm behavior. Tethering can make it possible for a trainer to more safely approach an aggressive bird and offer positive reinforcement.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT TETHERING:

Does the bird have the opportunity to fly?

Trained flighted raptors often have the opportunity to fly in free-flight programs and/or training sessions. In addition, tethering is a management system that can complement other management practices. For example, birds can be tethered during the day and free lofted at night. Some facilities tether birds for the show season and free loft them during the off-season.

How does one explain tethering to the public?

Tethering raptors has the potential to be viewed as inappropriate by individuals who are unfamiliar with the practice. It is important to ensure that raptors are tethered appropriately and are comfortable and relaxed when in public view. As a representative of the bird training profession it is important to answer questions about tethering in a manner that reflects the best practices of the bird training community. This requires careful consideration of the language used, while realizing that in most cases time constraints may prevent a complete and thorough explanation of the practice. Some examples of short responses to questions include:

“Much like a leash on a dog, tethering helps to keep the bird safe and close by in the event it is startled unexpectedly.”

“The birds are quite comfortable on their perches. Birds of prey in the wild spend a majority of their time perched, especially after they have eaten. These birds also have opportunities to fly



during the presentation and/or in their enclosures.”

“Flight is an energy depleting activity that serves specific purposes in the wild. Raptors in the wild fly to patrol territories, seek out food, secure mates, etc. When these needs are met, their time spent flying decreases. Similarly, in captivity, raptors choose to spend a majority of their time sitting on perches instead of flying.”

Trainers can also point out body postures that indicate comfort such as preening, bathing, sitting with one foot up, sunning, etc.

MISUSE OF TETHERING PRACTICES MAY HAVE THE FOLLOWING DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS:

Injury to legs and feet

Uneven jess length or poorly designed or fitted anklets that are too tight, too loose, or made of improper materials may injure the legs and feet.

Tangling

Improperly designed tethering equipment, perches, housing designs and/or potential hazards in the surrounding environment can result in tangling of the bird.

Loss or Death

Poorly maintained equipment can lead to equipment failure that may result in loss, injury or death of the bird or other birds in the vicinity.