



International Association of  
Avian Trainers and Educators

## **POSITION STATEMENT**

### **TETHERING AND THE USE OF JESSES**

*Prepared and published by*

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## BACKGROUND

Tethering and the holding of jesses are practices to manage individuals of various raptor species.

Tethering involves the application of jesses (jess straps) and pliable anklets around the legs of a bird. To prevent entanglement, the jesses are connected to a swivel, which is then connected to a 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.

The use of jesses can include other applications in addition to use for housing purposes. We acknowledge tethering also includes restraining a bird on the hand or glove by holding the jesses and have included discussion of this within the Position Statement.

## POSITION

IAATE recognizes there are a wide variety of practices used to manage birds under human care.

IAATE supports management practices that are proven to be safe for birds and trainers, provide for the health and welfare of birds, facilitate training and educational goals, and demonstrate optimum care for birds in given situations. The management practice of tethering raptors is generally regarded as safe when practiced appropriately. When tethering is used appropriately, the 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 practices include protecting tethered birds from the elements, intruders, predators, and other tethered birds in the vicinity.

IAATE supports both tethering and free-lofting (housing a bird un-tethered inside an enclosed space such as a cage or mew) as appropriate management practices for raptors. The evaluation of whether to use free-lofting, tethering, or a combination of both, should be ongoing based on the behavior of the bird and its physical and mental well-being.

IAATE supports tethering raptor species such as hawks, eagles, owls, falcons, etc. and strongly recommends against tethering vultures, caracaras, and all non-raptor species. Jesses and/or anklets should not be used on non-raptor species.

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



IAATE recommends the use of positive reinforcement to teach raptors to sit on the glove, while at the same time, avoiding the punishment associated with restraining a raptor during a bate.

IAATE supports the use of jesses as a safety measure and not as a training tool.

IAATE supports minimizing the use of jesses to give birds more control and power over their environment, which often leads to enhanced relationships with trainers and more reliable trained behavior.

IAATE recognizes that not all birds can be worked safely in all situations without the use of jesses.

### **SUPPORT FOR POSITION**

Flight is an energy depleting activity that serves specific purposes in the wild. Raptors in the wild fly to patrol territories, seek out food, perform courtship displays, etc. When these needs are met, their flight behavior decreases and they often spend much of their day perched in one location. Similarly, when a free-lofted raptor's needs are met, it will often choose to spend a majority of its time sitting on perches as opposed to flying around in its enclosure.

It could be assumed housing a raptor in a free-lofted situation will provide the bird with more exercise and perching options than when it is tethered on a perch, however this is not necessarily the case. Additionally, when raptors are observed flying around in mews it can be associated with attempting to escape the enclosure or experiencing stress.

### **TETHERING CAN BE AN EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT TOOL FOR RAPTORS, PROVIDING ADVANTAGES IN THE FOLLOWING AREAS:**

#### *Housing*

Although IAATE recommends birds have access to an outdoor area in their permanent enclosures, in cases where this is not possible, birds can be exposed to beneficial natural elements when tethered to a perch on a weathering lawn. This can aid in the health and welfare of the birds provided that the weathering area is appropriately protected from predators and other potential dangers to the birds.

#### *Stress Reduction*

When approached by a trainer, 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 during initial stages of training, the trainer has a better opportunity to approach and offer positive reinforcement, which can lead to trust-building interactions and the training of

desirable behavior such as stepping onto a gloved hand. By allowing for these initial approaches to be associated with an opportunity to gain a reward, the bird should learn to willingly come to the glove or remain stationary while a trainer approaches. Eventually, this training may result in the ability to free-loft the bird.

#### *Safety to Trainers*

Free-lofted raptors, particularly human imprinted raptors, can become aggressive in their enclosures for a variety of reasons. When a free-lofted raptor displays aggressive behavior there are reduced opportunities for a trainer to reinforce calm behavior. Tethering can make it possible for a trainer to more safely approach an aggressive bird and offer positive reinforcement for approach or step-up behavior.

### **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, 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 tethered bird, or other birds in the vicinity.

### **EMERGING PRACTICES REGARDING TETHERING AND THE USE OF JESSES**

#### *Management*

As trainers increase their understanding of the science of behavior change, there is a gradual movement toward giving birds more power over their environment. The scientific community has shown control is a primary reinforcer for animals. When a bird is empowered with control over its environment it will often perform with more reliable behavior and often at higher weights.

Some trainers are now working their birds directly out of the free-loft enclosure by simply opening the door and allowing the bird the opportunity to fly to stage and perform behaviors then return to the enclosure after its routine. Trainers are also teaching raptors to step directly into travel crates from their enclosure for transport to a release site. The bird is also taught to return to the crate after the routine for transport back to its enclosure. Again, by avoiding the

possibly aversive interactions associated with being carried on the glove and restrained by jesses, many birds will show more reliable behavior.

### *Training*

Traditionally trainers have held the jesses of birds during training sessions, restricting the bird's ability to leave the glove. Trainers are now discovering that jesses are often associated with negative reinforcement and positive punishment. The scientific community has shown with many species that the use of punishment is often associated with one or more of the following four detrimental side effects: 1) Escape avoidance behavior, 2) Aggression, 3) Apathy, 4) Phobia or generalized fear of the environment.

Each time a raptor bates off the glove and is caught up by the jesses, there is likely a loss of trust that the trainer has worked to gain through positive interactions with the bird. This punishment can carry over to the bird bating away from the trainer as he or she approaches the bird tethered on the perch. Aggression is often seen in the form of footing a trainer or vocalizing and showing other body language associated with aggression. Birds that learn they are powerless to control their environment through repeatedly being caught up by the jesses during bates may stop behavior altogether. This reduction in behavior may look like the bird has become comfortable on the glove but is usually the result of the bird submitting as learned helplessness takes over. Finally, birds that experience punishment associated with being held by jesses in specific areas or by specific people may develop fears of those places or people.

The new approach to working birds without jesses, or not holding jesses during programs, gives birds more control and power over their environment. When a bird learns it will not be held by the jesses after it lands on the glove, it will be more likely to land on the glove in the future.

While an argument could be made for the need to hold the jesses of a bird in order to talk about it for an extended period of time during a presentation, the behavior of sitting on the glove can be trained using positive reinforcement by reinforcing approximations of longer periods of time sitting on the glove. With this strategy a trainer can avoid the use of punishment, and all its detrimental side effects, while building a stronger relationship with the bird and long duration of glove-sitting behavior.

We recognize that not all birds can be worked in all situations without jesses. Safety concerns for trainers, the public, and other birds are important considerations when deciding to use jesses. When jesses are used they are best used as a safety tool, as opposed to a training tool involving punishment.