



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

TETHERING AND THE USE OF JESSES

Prepared and published by

The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators

www.IAATE.org

September 2015

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 a 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, and falcons and recommends against tethering vultures, caracaras, and all 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 birds to sit on the glove or hand to replace or avoid punishment and negative reinforcement strategies that are associated with restraining a bird with jesses when it bates off the glove or hand.

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 choice and control which often leads to enhanced relationships with trainers, more reliable trained behavior and improved welfare.

IAATE recognizes that not all raptors 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, as free-lofted raptors generally sit on perches rather than fly around their cages or mews. Additionally, when raptors are observed flying around in mews it can be associated with attempting to escape the enclosure or experiencing stress.

Use of Jesses on Non-raptor Birds

Recently, people in zoological facilities have begun using jesses on a wide variety of birds, such as kookaburras, corvids, tawny frogmouths, etc. The use of jesses on non-raptors can be dangerous. Few birds' legs are as strong as raptors' legs and therefore can't withstand the strain created by the jesses when the bird attempts to fly away from a handler.

Alternatives to jesses include exhibiting the bird in a secure environment such as a cage, clipping wings, using a harness, and teaching a bird to perform (e.g., station and recall behavior) free of restraints. Cages may be less desirable in many situations, and clipping wings can be very dangerous as uncontrolled flight can result in crashes to the ground or other objects and cause injuries. A harness is safer than jesses, but requires a skillful trainer using positive reinforcement to teach the animal to voluntarily participate in putting on and wearing the harness. Working with the bird free of restraints gives the bird more choice and control, and requires a highly skilled trainer to teach the bird to reliably enter a crate or other transport unit, and remain with the trainer and not fly away where its welfare may be compromised. When considering the use of jesses on a non-raptor bird, the most important question to ask is "Is this the right bird to have in our program considering the positive reinforcement training skill of our staff?" IAATE recommends only people skilled in positive reinforcement training techniques

train birds working in educational programs. IAATE has resources available to help trainers develop their skills using positive reinforcement training techniques.

Potential Advantages of Tethering as an Effective Management Tool for Raptors

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 voluntarily stepping onto a gloved hand. By allowing for these initial approaches to be associated with an opportunity to gain a reinforcer, the bird can 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 without the bird exhibiting escape/avoidance behavior.

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.

Potential Detrimental Effects of the Misuse of Tethering Practices

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. Using jesses or tethering non-raptors can cause injury to a bird's legs and feet due to added strain.

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 choice and control in their environment. The scientific community has shown control is a primary reinforcer for animals. When a bird is empowered with control it will often perform with more reliable behavior and often at higher weights.

Some trainers are now working their raptors directly out of the free-loft enclosure by simply opening the door and allowing the bird the opportunity to fly to stage, perform behaviors, and 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 program then return to the crate after the routine for transport back to the enclosure. 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 the detrimental side effects often associated with this negative reinforcement and positive punishment such as: 1) Escape avoidance behavior, 2) Aggression, 3) Apathy, 4) Phobia or irrational fear.

Each time a bird bates off the glove or hand 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 loss of trust 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 or biting 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 trying to escape. This reduction in escape behavior may look like the bird has become comfortable on the glove or hand but is usually the result of learned helplessness. 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 choice and control in their environment. When a bird learns it will not be held by the jesses after it lands on the glove or hand, it will be more likely to land on the glove or hand 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 or



hand can be trained using positive reinforcement by reinforcing approximations of longer periods of time sitting on the glove or hand. With this strategy a trainer can avoid the use of negative reinforcement and positive punishment and all their detrimental side effects while building a stronger relationship with the bird and long duration of glove or hand-sitting behavior or training of alternate species appropriate behaviors such as moving to and from a variety perches or stations.

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 negative reinforcement and positive punishment.