



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

FREE FLIGHT FOR PROGRAMS

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BACKGROUND

Free flight bird programs showcase the natural flight capabilities of birds through trained behaviors. When used effectively they, have the potential to increase the audience's awareness of the natural world and foster caring attitudes that inspire conservation action.

POSITION

With proper management and training, IAATE supports free flying birds in educational programs.

IAATE recommends the use of telemetry on most species of birds that are free flown outside, and strongly recommends its use with falcons and owls.

When developing a collection plan, IAATE recommends careful evaluation of the species' and individual's suitability for the facility's free flight program.

For the welfare of the birds, staff and public, IAATE recommends implementation of protocols for:

- Training of birds and staff.
- Use of telemetry.
- Fly-off recovery.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION

Telemetry:

Most birds flown free in education programs will, at one time or another, stray from the predicted course. When visual contact is lost, telemetry is an essential tool to locate such birds. Telemetry should be used on any bird a trainer feels would be difficult to locate after a fly-off and any birds that travel long distances, such as falcons, or birds that can be elusive, such as owls. IAATE recognizes that some species of birds, such as parrots, may present greater training challenges when it comes to safely wearing and not damaging transmitters.

Collection Plan:

When evaluating a bird for a free-flight program there are many factors to consider. Not all species and not all individuals of a given species are suitable for a free-flight program. Based on the natural history some species require a larger presentation/show facility (including stage and housing) and special consideration in regard to environment and climate.

Certain species or individuals require a higher level of staff experience and skill, so before considering any individual animal, first consider the skill and experience of your staff. Individual histories, such as birds whose wings were clipped in their first year, may impact the bird's physical capability to perform the desired behaviors required to promote program goals and messaging.

Non-imprinted corvids, non-imprinted owls, or aggressive imprinted birds can be extremely challenging, even for the most experienced trainer.

Compliance with government regulations may preclude certain species from being flown in programs.

Development of Protocols:

Effectively trained staff should demonstrate:

- A working knowledge of the science of behavior change principals, especially positive reinforcement strategies.
- The commitment and ability to develop a training program based primarily on the most positive, least intrusive methods and avoiding aversive training strategies whenever possible.
- A comprehensive understanding of food management and weight management, and its ethical application as described in the IAATE Food Management and Weight Management Position Statement.
- An awareness of environmental factors that pose a potential safety risk or might reduce motivation.
- An ability to arrange the environment to set the bird up for success.
- Knowledge of the natural and individual history of the program birds and the ability to evaluate an individual bird's suitability for the program.
- An ability to interpret a bird's body language and adjust the program or training plan accordingly.
- An ability to effectively use telemetry.
- Safe and species-appropriate creance use.
- An ability to execute the facility's fly-off protocol.

Effectively trained birds should demonstrate:

- A strong recall on cue and reliable crating behavior.
- A reliable response to cues in a variety of indoor and secure outdoor areas before flying free outside.
- An ability to perform reliably with multiple trainers, in diverse locations and with a variety of perches, props, etc.
- Flight skills such as descending from an elevated location, controlled landing, and negotiating steep angles, blind corners, and obstacles.
- Physical condition to perform the desired behavior without exhibiting signs of exhaustion or stress.

Telemetry protocol should include:

- Species appropriate telemetry selection (mounting system, transmitter weight and signal range).
- A training plan to acclimate a bird to attachment, operation and wearing of a transmitter.
- Testing the transmitter and receiver prior to each use.



- A schedule for battery testing according to the manufacturer's recommendation.
- Scheduled practice in the use of telemetry.

A fly-off protocol should be different than the facility's animal escape protocol and should include:

- A plan for communication between trainers and facility staff.
- A pre-established point person to make decisions regarding recovery and show continuation or modification.
- Pre-established points of best visibility.
- A plan for recovering birds from other exhibits.
- A schedule of practice drills.

In addition, bird identification (microchips, tags with phone number, bands with clearly readable numbers) and awareness of indigenous species behavior changes (mobbing behavior or alarm calls) increase the likelihood of recovery from a fly-off.