



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

TETHERING AND THE USE OF JESSES

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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 raptor. 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 raptor 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 raptor 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 in 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 raptor 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 raptors from the elements, intruders, predators, and other tethered birds in the vicinity.

IAATE supports free-lofting (housing a bird un-tethered inside an enclosed space such as a mew) of raptors whenever possible.

IAATE supports the temporary tethering of raptors in such situations and circumstances as would be necessary for the welfare and safety of birds and handlers, but only as a temporary situation with the goal being to move towards a free-lofting situation as soon as possible.

IAATE does not support tethering of raptors as a full-time, long-term housing situation.

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, and replace the behavior of bating off the glove and the use of punishment to decrease the bating behavior.

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 raptors 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 raptors can be worked safely in all situations without the use of jesses.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION

Housing

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.

That said, while tethering, when done correctly, should provide a raptor with perching options and choices, it does restrict a bird's ability to perch high, which is typically preferred and more comfortable for most raptors. While temporary tethering on the ground for short-term duration is not considered detrimental to an individual's overall welfare, tethering on an elevated platform can provide a more desirable tethering option. In order to maximize a bird's choices, and to provide the most control over housing environment, free-lofting may provide more choice and control than even the best tethering set up.

Training and Handling

Traditionally, trainers have held the jesses of raptors during training sessions, restricting the bird's ability to leave the glove. 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, or even free-lofted in a mew. Aggression is often seen in the form of footing a trainer, biting, or vocalizing and showing other body language associated with aggression. Raptors that learn they are powerless to control their environment through repeatedly being caught up by the jesses during bates may stop escape 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, i.e. learned helplessness. Finally, raptors that experience punishment associated with being held by jesses in specific areas or by specific people may develop fears and avoidance behavior associated with those places or people.

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, raptors can be exposed to beneficial natural elements when tethered to a perch on a weathering lawn for periods of the day, and free-lofted in a mew for other periods. 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.

However, IAATE recommends that facilities consider availability of appropriate housing options during their collection planning and consider avoiding the acquisition of birds for which appropriate full-time housing that meets current standards and provides for good welfare is not available. The need to tether a raptor in order to meet its health and welfare needs due to lack of appropriate housing is something that should be seriously considered before acquisition of any individual bird.

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 the bird. Tethering a raptor during the initial stages of training can be a way of reducing trauma caused by panicked flight in some birds. Because tethering restricts the bird's ability to move away, tethering requires a highly skilled and observant trainer able to read subtle shifts in bird body language to determine whether to approach, stay, or leave the environment and avoid displacing or causing further stress to the bird. By allowing for these initial approaches to be associated with a food reinforcer, the bird should learn to willingly come to the glove or remain stationary while a trainer approaches. Eventually, this training may result in increased trust and the ability to free-loft the bird.





Safety to Trainers

Free-lofted raptors, particularly human imprinted raptors, can, under certain conditions, demonstrate behaviors associated with aggression (for example, footing, biting, vocalizing) in their enclosures. When a free-lofted raptor displays aggressive behavior, there are reduced opportunities for a trainer to reinforce calm behavior. However, offering food reinforcers through the bars or other barriers on the mew can help increase trust between trainer and bird. Tethering can also make it possible for a trainer to more safely work with a bird demonstrating behaviors associated with aggression and offer positive reinforcement for approach or step-up behavior.

In such situations, tethering for safety reasons should be considered a temporary measure to allow for reinforcing appropriate behaviors in the presence of a trainer. The goal should be to work through issues with a mind to returning to free-lofting for the individual. If this proves not possible, consideration should be given to alternate housing situations and management techniques for raptors demonstrating behaviors associated with aggression towards trainers entering their enclosures, such as the ability to train the bird to shift out of its primary enclosure before a trainer enters.

USE OF JESSES IN TRAINING AND PROGRAMS

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

It is possible to work a raptor directly out of a free-loft enclosure by simply opening the door and giving the bird the opportunity to fly to stage and perform behaviors then return to the enclosure after its routine. Raptors can also be taught to step directly into travel crates from their enclosure for transport to a release site, and to return to the crate after the routine for transport back to the enclosure. Again, by avoiding the possibly aversive interactions associated with being carried on the glove and restrained by jesses, many birds will perform more reliable behavior.

Working raptors without jesses, or not holding jesses during programs, gives birds more control and power over their environment. When a raptor 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 raptor 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.

IAATE recognizes not all raptors 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 (behavior-reducing action). It is also important to note the use of jesses on a raptor requires even more dedication to sensitivity and skill of the handler. When a raptor is tethered to a trainer's glove, it loses its ability to successfully use its natural escape behaviors (i.e. flight) when in the presence of an aversive stimuli, which could constitute a welfare issue if allowed to go unresolved. Therefore, handlers working with raptors tethered to the glove need a high degree of sensitivity to the subtle body language of the individual such that they can remove the bird from an aversive stimulus. It is ever incumbent on handlers to be mindful of potential environmental issues and protect the tethered-to-glove raptor from having to endure close proximity to aversive stimuli or experience the failure to use its own escape behaviors through bating.

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 or designed equipment can lead to equipment failure that may result in loss, injury, or death of the tethered raptor, or other birds in the vicinity.

