



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

SELECTION CONSIDERATIONS FOR NON-RELEASABLE BIRDS

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BACKGROUND

Ambassador animals play an important role in conservation education. Ambassador birds can provide inspirational experiences to audiences when living on exhibit, presented on the glove, or in free flight demonstrations. In some regions, native birds are primarily acquired through wildlife rehabilitators. Wildlife rehabilitation is the care of injured, orphaned, or sick animals so they can be released back to the wild. Some animals may be deemed non-releasable by the rehabilitator when they have sustained a physical or psychological injury that would prevent them from surviving in the wild.

In some cases, disabilities that lead to a non-releasable status may also preclude a high quality of life in human care. Birds with such disabilities may be available for placement with regularity. Ultimately, the responsibility for determining the suitability of a bird for a life in human care is that of the acquiring party. Careful consideration and collection planning is an integral part of whole-life care.³ Acquisitions should be undertaken with guidelines in place that prioritize life-long welfare of the individual.

POSITION

IAATE supports the acquisition of birds propagated for conservation education programs.

IAATE supports the acquisition of non-releasable birds with non-bilateral vision impairment.

IAATE supports the acquisition of purposefully or accidentally human-reared owls and Corvids.

IAATE supports the acquisition of non-releasable birds with full mobility and ambulation, i.e., birds with complete use of all limbs; feet, legs, and wings.

IAATE supports the acquisition of non-releasable birds which are neurologically sound, i.e., birds that display species appropriate neurologic behaviors and are free from neurological symptoms.

IAATE supports the acquisition of non-releasable birds exhibiting natural behaviors such as preening, bathing, flying, and walking as well as other species-specific behaviors while in human care.

IAATE recommends against the acquisition of non-releasable birds with partial or full wing amputation.

IAATE recommends against the acquisition of non-releasable birds with luxation of any joint. IAATE recommends against the acquisition of non-releasable birds with an injury to the legs or feet that would result in uneven or unstable perching ability that might result in severe bumblefoot.



IAATE recommends against the acquisition of non-releasable birds which have had a fracture in the wing close to a joint which may change the articulation of that joint and lead to joint disease.

IAATE recommends against the acquisition of birds who exhibit neurologic symptoms such as partial or full paralysis, muscle weakness, poor coordination, seizures, or disorientation.

IAATE recommends the acquisition of young, non-releasable birds without the associated trauma of a stressful rehabilitation process.

IAATE recommends that facilities use ambassador selection criteria that are more stringent than those required by The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and other regulatory bodies.

IAATE recommends that birds with injuries or abnormalities that resulted in non-releasable status be monitored regularly throughout the life of the individual.

IAATE recommends individual welfare assessments for all birds in care on an ongoing and regularly scheduled basis.

IAATE recommends an assessment period after the acquisition of any non-releasable bird during which the candidate's suitability as an ambassador can be assessed by trained staff with a plan in place for next steps (e.g., exhibit-only, return to original facility, euthanasia) if the candidate fails assessment.

IAATE recommends the acquiring facility have an in depth understanding of the natural history of any non-releasable birds that they acquire. Certain species (e.g., Accipiters, Osprey, among others) are not typically suitable for most ambassador experiences due to temperament and their fractious nature and in most cases should not be acquired.

IAATE recognizes there are currently non-releasable birds in human care at zoos and other zoological facilities that do not meet these criteria. IAATE encourages assessment on a case-by-case basis. Trainers and care givers who are not experienced in welfare assessment are encouraged to seek professional advice in the assessment.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION

The Association of Zoos and Aquariums (AZA) suggests animals are experiencing good welfare when they are "healthy, comfortable, well-nourished, safe, able to develop and express species-typical relationships, behaviors, and cognitive abilities, and not suffering from unpleasant states such as pain, fear, or distress." ¹ At minimum, non-releasable birds used in education should be able to eat on their own, maintain good feather condition with regular preening, bathing, and



the absence of fractious behavior, exhibit species appropriate behaviors, have full mobility, and willingly engage with trainers.

Most wild bird species are cryptic by nature and often mask pain or distress, which may make them appear calm or comfortable to even the most skilled observer. It is therefore vital to understand the long-term physical and psychological changes in welfare that are associated with conditions that deem rehabilitation patients non-releasable. Injuries and illnesses may include but are not limited to healed fractures near joints, non-union fractures, immobility of joints, chronic neurologic symptoms, and partial wing amputations.

Post-mortem study of non-releasable raptors reveals that many injuries which resulted in permanent placement also resulted in progressive, chronic illness that is likely painful.² In humans, fractures that are near joints or misaligned (non-union) are often associated with increased risk of arthritis and other joint diseases, and the same has been found to be true in raptors.^{2,4} Additionally, healed injuries such as frozen wings that result in asymmetrical balance or movement can lead to compensatory movement injuries also associated with pain.²

An important consideration in preventing welfare degeneration over time is mobility. Compensatory movement injury or illness such as arthritis is also associated with injuries that impair mobility such as amputation or luxation or a significant number of missing flight feathers. Additional to the associated pain or discomfort, impaired mobility can impede a bird's ability to preen thoroughly, resulting in chronic poor feather condition and higher risk for broken blood feathers.² Conditions that impede mobility can also lead to frequent, chronic injuries if the bird repeatedly attempts to escape a perceived threat. There is also an association with chronic foot conditions such as bumblefoot due to unbalanced posture creating pressure on footpads and hard landings caused by the inability to land slowly. Difficulty navigating an enclosure can also result in serious or repeated injury.

Some disabilities, such as visual impairments or amputations that do not impede mobility e.g., the alula or certain digits, may be appropriate for placement. These cases should only be considered when bird temperament and trainer skill overlap to allow for voluntary participation in training, care, and monitoring.

Attempts to assess pain in animals is made difficult due to their masking abilities. Conditions that are theorized to cause pain should be evaluated carefully with the guidance of a veterinarian. Pain can impact an animal in a variety of ways that may include lameness of a limb, overall lethargy, weakened immune system, anorexia, aggression, abnormal vocalizations, etc. Long term pain management requires continued assessment. In addition, many pain medications are not recommended for long term use, as they can result in secondary complications that may further degrade quality of life for the animal.



Psychological health is equally important to physical health when considering non-releasable birds for education. Impaired mobility associated with joint diseases, amputations, misaligned healed wing fractures, missing feathers, etc. may limit a bird's ability to freely navigate their enclosure. Custom perching can be installed but it is important to consider that limited perching options inherently reduce the number of choices a bird can make and their level of control over the environment. It is also difficult to assess a bird's willingness to engage with trainers when their mobility precludes the ability to escape. Willingness to engage with trainers may also be reduced by repeated instances of capture for medical attention as may be required by chronic injury or illness.

The ability to make choices and be an active participant in voluntary training is another consideration in the psychological health of the non-releasable bird. Many species who do not have the opportunity to associate with human-caretakers in a positive manner as youngsters may continue to experience innate fear of humans while in human care (e.g., corvids, owls, Accipiters, etc.). For many species of birds, once they have reached adulthood their unwillingness to voluntarily participate in training sessions leads inexperienced trainers to use force and coercion and/or an unsafe reduction in weight and diet to make use of these birds as ambassadors, furthering the bird's psychological distress.

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