IAATE

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.

Free flight is defined for this statement as unrestricted outdoor flight, meaning the bird is not attached to a creance nor is it inside the walls of a building or enclosure.

POSITION

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

IAATE strongly recommends training using the most positive, least intrusive, effective methods to develop desired behaviors. Please see the IAATE position statement on Training for more information.

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

When developing a collection plan, IAATE recommends careful evaluation of the species' and the individual's suitability for the facility's free-flight program. Facilities should ensure they have appropriate disposition policies for individuals who do not fit the organizational requirements. See the IAATE position statement on Collection Planning for more information.

For the welfare of the birds, staff, and public, IAATE recommends implementation of protocols for:
- Continuous training and skill development for 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, birds that travel long distances, such as falcons, and 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. See the IAATE position statement on Housing for more information.

Certain species or individuals require a higher level of staff experience and skill. Before considering any individual animal, first consider the skill and experience of staff. Individual history, such as a bird whose wings were clipped in its first year, may impact the bird's physical ability to perform the desired behaviors required to promote program goals and messaging. Parent-reared corvids, parent-reared owls, or individuals that have a history of demonstrating aggressive behavior towards humans can be extremely challenging, even for the most experienced trainer. The IAATE position statement on the Welfare of Human-reared vs Parent-reared Owls in Ambassador Animal Programs has more information.

Compliance with US government regulations may preclude certain species from being flown in programs in America. Bird trainers and show developers should ensure they check any government regulations for their location prior to acquiring birds.

Development of Protocols:
Effectively trained staff should demonstrate:
● A working knowledge of the science of behavior change principles, especially positive reinforcement strategies.
● The commitment and ability to develop a training program based on the most positive, least intrusive, effective 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 position statement on Food Management and Weight Management.
● An awareness of environmental factors that pose a potential safety risk or might reduce motivation.
● The ability to arrange the environment to set the bird up for success and to train in approximations to allow the bird to build skills.
● Knowledge of the natural and individual history of each bird and the ability to evaluate an individual bird's suitability for the program.
● The ability to interpret a bird's observable behaviour and adjust the program or training plan accordingly.
● The ability to effectively use telemetry.
● Safe and species-appropriate creance use as necessary.
● The ability to execute the facility's fly-off protocol.

Effectively trained birds should demonstrate:
● A strong recall on cue and reliable crate behavior.

- A reliable response to cues in a variety of indoor and secure outdoor areas before flying free.
- Properly generalized behaviors showing reliability with multiple trainers in diverse locations with variable environmental conditions.
- 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 comprehensive staff training plan to ensure proper use of tracking devices and knowledge of their limitations. This should include regularly scheduled practice.
- A training plan to acclimate a bird to attachment, operation, and wearing of a transmitter.
- Testing the transmitter and receiver before each use.
- A schedule for battery testing according to the manufacturer's recommendation.

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 pre-packed flyoff kit, including essentials such as binoculars, receiver, dry food items (e.g. pellet), lure if appropriate, glove if required, and other useful items, such as flashlight, hat, rainjacket, and water.
- A schedule of practice drills.
- A nominated person and procedure (usually office-based) for contacting near neighbors or businesses, as well as potential statements to issue via social media if necessary.

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

It should be noted that recovery of a lost bird following a fly off is imperative not just for the individual bird's welfare, but also to reduce the chances of introducing invasive species, breeding with local populations of the same species and possible hybridisation with wild populations of related species.

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