



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

WELFARE OF HUMAN-REARED VS PARENT-REARED OWLS IN AMBASSADOR ANIMAL PROGRAMS

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BACKGROUND

Ambassador animals play a vital role in connecting people to wildlife by delivering inspirational messages and fostering meaningful experiences. Owls are among the most charismatic and compelling representatives, captivating audiences and inspiring conservation action. For the purposes of this position statement, IAATE defines “ambassadors” as individuals that represent their species to the public—whether tethered to a trainer or interpreter’s gloved hand, demonstrating natural free-flight behaviors in programs, housed on exhibit for educational purposes, or engaged in any combination of these activities.

Ambassador owls are often acquired from wildlife rehabilitation centers after being deemed non-releasable due to physical or behavioral conditions. Some cannot return to the wild because they have become “imprinted” or overly habituated to people, while others are parent-reared individuals with injuries that prevent them from surviving independently in the wild. For owls in particular, it’s been observed that the type of rearing, human- or parent, has a lasting impact on their suitability for ambassador roles. Early experiences shape an owl’s comfort around humans, its adaptability to training, and its overall welfare in educational settings.

Owls raised by humans during their formative months (generally the first few months after hatching) tend to exhibit greater comfort and confidence in the presence of people. When these birds are appropriately socialized and exposed to a variety of stimuli early in life, they often adapt well to human care and are strong candidates for ambassador programs. For the purposes of this position statement, discussions of imprinting will be set aside in favor of focusing on observable behavior and welfare outcomes.

Conversely, parent-reared owls are not commonly observed adapting well to life in human care, especially where human proximity and handling is a program requirement. Parent reared owls often show escape behavior when in close proximity to people and it is likely that most interactions between humans and parent-reared owls will result in inescapable aversive stimulation for the owl, which can lead to an overall reduction in that animal’s welfare.

POSITION

IAATE supports the use of human-reared owls in ambassador animal programs when these birds are effectively trained using positive reinforcement methods.

IAATE discourages the use of parent-reared owls in ambassador animal programs.

IAATE recognizes an owl may experience poor welfare when force and coercion are used for retrieving it from a perch, either in free-loft or when tethered. Examples of force and coercion include using positive punishment/negative reinforcement, which necessitates the presence of aversive stimuli, to get the owl to step up. Examples may include eliciting a step up by applying pressure with the glove (to the toes, legs or chest), following it from perch to perch, grabbing it by or pulling on its equipment, or catching it with a net. To maintain the highest level of welfare for an owl in human care, the bird should be given the choice to approach the trainer and willingly step-



up (foot raised, body forward, and stepping) onto a glove without force or coercion. This is generally achieved by an experienced trainer through shaping step-up behavior using positive reinforcement.

IAATE recognizes every animal is an individual and exceptions to generalizations do occur. For example, a parent-raised owl brought into human care within its first year may adapt in a way similar to a human-raised owl under the care of sensitive, experienced trainers. However, this position statement is focused on best practices generalized to all owls and levels of trainers.

IAATE recognizes the disparity in levels of competency in humans working with owls. Some trainers are more sensitive and skilled than others and will experience more successful training outcomes than other trainers. The skill level of the trainer is an important factor in working with any owl, i.e., a more experienced trainer may be more observant and responsive to the subtle body language that may be a precursor to escape behavior. However, even the most skilled trainer will likely struggle to train a parent-reared owl while still providing choice and control and a higher level of welfare that is more easily achieved when training a human-reared owl in similar environmental conditions.

IAATE therefore supports the treatment of all owls as individuals, regardless of their rearing and training histories, and regular individual welfare assessments which measure physical and cognitive health.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION

Owls are among the most popular ambassador animals employed in educational programs around the world. Owls captivate audience members and provide valuable opportunities to inspire people to care about them and their environment. Close encounters with such a charismatic animal are made possible through a variety of strategies: human-rearing, building trusting relationships with people, and the application of successful positive reinforcement strategies.

Understanding Fear and Its Role in Behavior

Fear is a universal emotion that evolved as a vital survival tool. It allows animals to detect and respond to potential threats, helping them avoid harm and increasing their chances of survival. When an animal perceives danger, fear activates physiological and behavioral responses, commonly described as “fight, flight, freeze, or hide.” These reactions help the animal respond quickly to potential threats.

For animals in human care, persistent fear can seriously impact welfare. Chronic stress elevates hormones like corticosterone, weakens the immune system, and interferes with natural behaviors. Effective care and training should therefore focus on minimizing fear through rearing methods, desensitization, positive reinforcement, and careful observation of behavioral cues.

Human rearing vs parent rearing

In ambassador owls, human-rearing is especially beneficial as it allows human caregivers to create positive associations during the critical pre-fledge development phase. Caretakers also have the opportunity to expose them to a wide variety of conditions it may encounter later in life as an



ambassador animal (crowds of people at close proximity, vehicles, buildings, etc.) while they are best equipped to learn they have nothing to fear from these situations and stimuli. It is critically important to take advantage of this developmental phase to expose the young owl in careful positive approximations to novel stimuli for the individual to become a resilient and confident individual best suited for the role of ambassador owl.

Though human-rearing is the most advisable strategy to prepare an owl for interactions with people and educational programming, it does not guarantee that the individual will become a suitable ambassador. Owls raised by humans without regular exposure to new and varied stimuli often struggle in ambassador settings, as they may lack the resilience and adaptability needed to cope with novel environments, sounds, and audiences. Early and consistent exposure to diverse, positive experiences is therefore essential in helping a young owl develop confidence and comfort in future programs.

It is also important to note that using forceful or coercive methods (see above section for examples of force and coercion in this context) can have serious welfare and safety consequences. Human-reared owls subjected to such methods may develop defensive responses that can lead to aggressive behavior, potentially posing safety risks, especially to inexperienced staff. In contrast, parent-reared owls exposed to aversive training may respond with escape behaviors or exhibit signs of learned helplessness, appearing calm or compliant while experiencing significant stress and reduced welfare. In both cases, coercive handling undermines welfare and the trust essential for ambassador success.

Human-Reared Owls

Because human-reared owls grow up in close association with people, they typically show little fear of humans and display confidence in their presence. When early rearing is combined with positive reinforcement training, particularly when food is used to reward calm, voluntary behaviors, owls often learn quickly to perch comfortably on a gloved hand and/or exhibit behaviors that are associated with comfort in the presence of people. This approach tends to be highly effective with human-reared owls but is rarely successful with parent-reared individuals, who lack early positive experiences with humans.

Parent-Reared Owls and Adaptability

Parent-reared owls differ greatly from their human-reared counterparts. Without early, positive exposure to humans and the many stimuli of the human environment, they struggle to adapt to ambassador roles. They seldom achieve the same ease with husbandry, veterinary, or program-related behaviors and often display persistent signs of fear or distress (bating or trying to fly off the glove while tethered, concealment postures/slicked feathers, beak clacking, hissing, flinching, ducking or flying away from or at trainers, flaring wings, raising hackles, and/or panting). Training parent-reared owls to tolerate handling, transport, or public presentation often requires levels of intrusion, restraint, or coercion that violate ethical welfare standards. Many also have chronic injuries (such as limited flight or vision impairment), further complicating training and welfare outcomes.

Flooding and Learned Helplessness

Because parent-reared owls frequently exhibit escape behaviors, trainers often resort to flooding, a highly aversive method that exposes the owl to the feared situation (such as being held on the glove) without a way to escape. The intended outcome may be habituation, but more often the owl continues showing escape behaviors for years, living in a state of chronic stress and reduced welfare. When the bird eventually stops struggling, it is typically not comfort but **learned helplessness**—a psychological state in which the animal gives up active responses because it has learned that escape is impossible. Learned helplessness is a common welfare concern in parent-reared owls under these conditions and is associated with apathy, withdrawal, and loss of behavioral diversity, even when the possibility of escape is restored.

Counterconditioning and Desensitization

Counterconditioning is a classical conditioning training approach that can work well with many species of animals, especially individuals demonstrating a low rate of escape behavior in the presence of humans. However, it can be a challenging strategy to use with parent-reared owls without compromising their welfare, often through unhealthy food reduction.

Counterconditioning is the pairing of food or another positive stimulus with the presence of a feared one which can be an effective strategy for some species, especially those with mild fear responses. Systematic desensitization is an alternate technique used to reduce an animal's undesirable emotional response (fear, anxiety, or aggression) to a specific trigger or situation by gradually and systematically exposing the animal to a very low-intensity version of that trigger. The key is to proceed so slowly that the animal never becomes scared or distressed, allowing them to remain calm and eventually habituate to the stimulus. In practice, however, this strategy often fails with highly fearful, parent-reared owls. who can be so distressed by human presence that they refuse to eat for days, resulting in unhealthy weight loss and compromised welfare if food restriction is used to encourage participation.

Conclusion:

The welfare of ambassador owls depends on careful consideration of their individual histories, rearing methods, and behavioral responses. Evidence and experience consistently show that human-reared owls, when raised with appropriate socialization and trained through positive reinforcement, are best suited to ambassador roles and can thrive in educational programs. In contrast, parent-reared owls often experience significant and ongoing stress when exposed to unavoidable human interaction, resulting in compromised welfare and limited educational value. IAATE encourages all institutions and trainers to prioritize ethical training methods that provide owls with choice, control, and positive reinforcement. By selecting behaviorally appropriate candidates and applying evidence-based training practices that support measurable indicators of positive welfare, caregivers can maximize both the effectiveness of ambassador programs and the well-being of the owls involved.

References

Pierce, W. D., Cheney, C.D., 2013, Behavior analysis and learning, Fifth edition, Psychology Press, Page 484

Chance, P., 2009, Learning and Behavior, Sixth Edition, Active Learning Edition, Wadsworth,

Cengage Learning, Page 390, 394-395

<https://www.fws.gov/forms/3-200-10b.pdf> The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is mandated to enforce specific laws and regulations in regards to the imprinting of native owls. For this reason, it often requires patience to find a native, imprinted owl appropriate for use in ambassador animal programs.

Definitions:

¹**Learned Helplessness:** (Pierce and Cheney - glossary p. 484-485). This involves exposing an animal to inescapable and severe aversive stimulation (shocks). Eventually the animal gives up and stops attempting to avoid or escape the situation. Next, an escape response that under ordinary circumstances would be acquired easily is made available, but the animal does not make the response. The organism seems to give up and become helpless when presented with inescapable aversive stimulation.

²**Counterconditioning:** (Paul Chance - glossary p. 390). The use of Pavlovian conditioning to reverse the unwanted effects of prior conditioning.

³**Systematic Desensitization:** (Paul Chance - glossary p. 394-395). A procedure for treating phobias in which a person imagines progressively stronger forms of the frightening CS (Conditional Stimulus) while relaxed. It is a form of counterconditioning.