

International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

FOOD MANAGEMENT AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

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BACKGROUND

Animals exhibit a variety of behaviors during their pursuit of food resources. Food is a primary reinforcer of behavior for animals, whether captive or wild, and can be an essential tool for shaping the behavior of animals in human care. The most ethical form of animal training involves the use of positive reinforcement, with food as an important reinforcer, to achieve training goals. Positive reinforcement training can also provide opportunities for animals to use their senses and adaptations, like their wild counterparts, to obtain food. It empowers them to make decisions and experience the consequences of their actions. The presentation of food as a positive reinforcer often involves manipulating the method and amount of food presented. Two strategies that trainers often use to create motivation for food reinforcers are called Food Management and Weight Management.

Food Management

Food reinforcers are often used to increase motivation to present a desired behavior when training birds. Managing when and how food is delivered, what food items are offered, and the ratio of food items offered can create desire to present behaviors for food reinforcers. This practice is referred to as “food management.”

Weight Management

The weight and appetite of an animal are valuable indicators of its general health, so monitoring a bird’s weight is a valuable tool in understanding its motivation to present a desired behavior as it relates to various weight ranges. Once a healthy weight range that corresponds to desirable behavioral responses to food is established, a diet is prepared to maintain the bird in that weight range. The weight range may be adjusted depending on response during training sessions. Various conditions may influence behavior, such as weather, age, food items, etc., and should be taken into consideration when evaluating weights and diets. These weight ranges may also vary between individuals of the same species. The goal is to maintain the highest healthy weight possible and provide the greatest amount and variety of high-quality food while maintaining the desired behavioral response. This practice is referred to as “weight management.”

POSITION

IAATE recognizes there are a wide variety of practices used to manage birds that participate in education programs.

IAATE supports safe food management and weight management practices that both provide for the health and welfare of the birds and facilitate training. When applied properly, creating a desire for food reinforcers can be an important element in achieving these goals.

IAATE does not condone any management strategies that involve reducing food offered to the point of compromising the health of a bird. IAATE also cautions against excessive feeding that results in obesity.

IAATE SUPPORTS, ENCOURAGES AND PROMOTES:

- Employing training practices other than weight reduction that result in desired responses, such as food management, reducing environmental distractions, creating antecedent conditions that increase the probability of desirable behavior, and promote positive relationships between trainer and learner.
- Using a wide variety of food reinforcers that are nutritionally appropriate and preferred by the bird.
- Timing training sessions to coincide with when a bird is most receptive to food reinforcers.
- The development of trainers' observation skills associated with reading a bird's body language to determine its level of motivation for food reinforcers.
- The use of appropriate secondary, or learned, reinforcers such as tactile contact, verbal praise, or enrichment items, in addition to primary reinforcers such as food.
- Ensuring food management and weight management practices are only used with healthy birds.
- Identifying the healthy ad lib weight of a bird before it is selected for a food management and weight management training program.
    - Ad lib (ad libitum) weight is defined as the free-feeding weight of an animal as opposed to the weight after a managed diet. In nutritional studies, this phrase denotes providing an animal with free access to food and water thereby allowing the animal to self-regulate intake according to its biological needs. However, it has been observed that some species or individuals may become obese when given free food and this should be considered when assessing a healthy ad lib weight.
- Weekly or more frequently weighing a bird to determine healthy ranges at which it shows desired behavioral responses.
    - Weight ranges should be determined using observable responses to measurable goal behaviors rather than focusing on the number on the scale.
- Maintaining daily records of a bird's food and weight when weight management is being employed for training purposes.
- Continually evaluating behavior and training strategies to ensure the bird remains healthy.
- Evaluating training techniques before lowering a bird's weight. This reevaluation should include asking:
    - Is this the right bird for the job?
    - Is this the right trainer for the job?
    - Is the training strategy working or should it be changed?
    - Is the trainer's relationship with the bird as strong as it can be?
    - Has the trainer done everything possible, including setting up appropriate environmental antecedents, to set the bird up to succeed?
    - Has the trainer maximized the use of positive reinforcement and minimized the use of coercion and other aversive stimuli?

SUPPORT FOR POSITION STATEMENT

Using food management and/or weight management can facilitate training in the following ways:

High value food items can become primary reinforcers for behavior

Using food in training can reinforce behavior when conditions may not support the use of secondary reinforcers. For example, a bird that has no positive reinforcement history with a trainer may not find attention or tactile stimuli reinforcing, therefore food, if it is working as a reinforcer, can have a significant influence on behavior.

The use of coercive training strategies can be minimized

Using food management and weight management can create a learning environment in which birds choose to participate, thus minimizing the need to use coercion. For example, rather than a trainer chasing and capturing a bird in its enclosure, a bird can be trained with food reinforcers to voluntarily approach a trainer.

Birds potentially eat a more balanced diet

By offering a bird different food reinforcers during training sessions, trainers are better able to ensure that the bird consumes all elements of the prescribed diet. When food is offered freely, a bird may selectively consume its preferred foods over less preferred, possibly healthier, food items. Food management and weight management practices may increase motivation to eat the less preferred food items.

MISUSING FOOD MANAGEMENT AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT MAY HAVE THE FOLLOWING DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS:

The health of the bird is compromised

When using food management, excessive use of preferred food reinforcers may reduce consumption of a balanced diet, which may lead to compromised health. The combination of food reinforcers should satisfy the nutritional needs of the bird. Food management strategies that do not take into consideration the physiological needs of the bird can lead to health issues. For example, species that feed throughout the day may require their diet to be broken down and distributed into more frequent, smaller feedings to maintain optimum health.

When using weight management, excessive reduction in weight may lead to illness and/or death. For example, anemia may be brought about by imposing a fixed body weight, which does not compensate for the body's demand for increased food while performing high-energy behaviors, such as physically demanding flights. Without sufficient nutrition to allow for the muscle-building process, a bird's metabolism will draw upon muscle and blood protein from the body to gain energy.

Conversely, if a diet is high in fat or a bird's weight is too high, it can result in obesity-related health issues. Frequent rapid fluctuations of a bird's weight can be unhealthy.

There is a breakdown of behavior

When using food management, failure to consider the relationship between feeding schedule and training sessions may result in a breakdown of behavior due to a lack of motivation for food. For example, feeding too much of a bird's diet before a training session may decrease its motivation while not providing frequent feedings may cause excessive anticipatory behavior.

When using weight management, excessive reduction in weight may cause the bird to become too anxious and focus only on the food instead of the training process, resulting in diminished learning or increased latency. Additionally, reducing the weight too low can cause a loss of appetite, health issues, and reduction of motivation to perform behaviors. Similarly, if a bird's weight is too high, it may lose motivation for food, possibly resulting in increased latency, inattentiveness, or loss of a bird due to a fly-off.

Poor feather condition and an unnatural molt cycle

When using food management and weight management, prolonged excessive reduction in weight can interrupt or prevent the natural molt pattern or increase the likelihood of improper feather growth. Birds that work at or near their ad lib weights will usually have molt patterns and cycles that are similar to their wild counterparts. Misuse of weight management can also cause feather damage due to excessive motivation for food that may result in a bird flapping or jumping towards the trainer and hanging on enclosure barriers.

Presentation of aggressive and/or other undesirable behaviors

When using food management, failure to consider the relationship between feeding schedule and training sessions may result in undesirable behavior. For example, withholding food for an extended period of time may result in excessive anticipatory behaviors.

If a bird's weight is too low, it may exhibit undesirable behaviors related to excessive anticipation for food. If a bird's weight is too high, it may present undesirable behaviors like fear responses to routine environmental stimuli, increased latency, or aggressive behavior such as territorial defense.

REFERENCES:

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