

Flying macaws: problems of early wing clipping, a case study.

Introduction

A young bird that starts to leave the nest will practise its flying techniques and especially its landing skills. A bird will not automatically be a good flyer. He has to learn this, while its parents still take care of him.

“Parrots, like most other birds, develop their flight skills in the first few months of their lives. Nature provides motivation for a young parrot to launch itself out of the nest cavity and try its wings for the first time. Like a child learning to ride a bicycle, a young parrot will make many mistakes as it develops the skills and coordination required to become a master of the sky.” (Steve Martin; To fly or not to fly, that is the question).

“A companion parrot that had its wings clipped before it learned to fly will miss out on this very important period of its life and may never develop good flight skill. When the owner lets the birds wings grow in, the bird’s first attempt at flight may be similar to putting a person on a bicycle for the first time in his or her life and sending them racing down a steep hill.” (Steve Martin; To fly or not to fly, that is the question).

Pet birds are (sometimes) clipped to prevent them from flying, for different reasons.

“Clipping before or during fledging can lead to permanent impairment of flight skills for some species/individuals”. (EAZA Parrot Taxon Advisory Group; Ethical considerations on parrots in presentations and current recommendations)

If you clip the bird before it has left the nest, it will miss out on the important stage of life to learn how to fly. Later in life it will take longer to build up the confidence and skills need for good flying and landing. Every time the bird tries to fly it will be punished by crashing.

If you clip the bird after it has already learned how to fly, it will crash even harder and its punishment for trying to fly will thus be harder.

At Landgoed Hoenderdaell we fly 7 blue and golden macaws in our educational demonstration. Some of them have never been clipped, others have been clipped at an early stage and one is clipped after she learned how to fly. When we tried to learn these 7 macaws to fly in our demonstration we noticed big differences in how well they flew and how they coped with changes.

We had to change our training plans and our antecedents more than once to help them build confidence and skills in flying and landing so they could participate in our demonstration.

Landgoed Hoenderdaell situation

Our macaws are:

- Piet en Loes: born in 2015 and arrived in 2016 at Landgoed Hoednerdaell. When they arrived they were both clipped. They were put together in an aviary and they became a pair. In 2017 we let their wing grow back and started to train them indoors to fly in our new demonstration.



Figure 1: Piet en Loes



Figure 2: Kruiemel, Huub, Billy en Arie

- Arie, Huub, Kruiemel en Billy: born in 2017 and not yet completely fledged came to Landgoed Hoenderdaell in 2017. As soon as they started to fly, we let them practise in our indoor enclosure. We also introduced them to Piet en Loes, so they could all be housed together in their new aviary.

- Jacky: born in 2014, also arrived in 2017. Previously a pet, but her owners couldn't keep her anymore. We were told she was able to fly and had flown, but on arrival she was clipped. We introduced her to the other macaws and she was easily accepted. At first she seemed to bond with Piet, but later on she started to like Huub.

At Landgoed Hoenderdaell there has been a birds of prey demonstration since the beginning of the park. But starting in 2017 the park changed the way they housed their demonstration birds and they not only wanted birds of prey anymore, but also other kind of birds. In 2018 we opened our new location, the Avitorium. At this point we moved all 7 macaws together to 1 big aviary. For our demonstration, our ultimate goal is to fly them out of their aviary into the demonstration area, have them fly around, land on their specific stations and then que them to get back into their aviary.

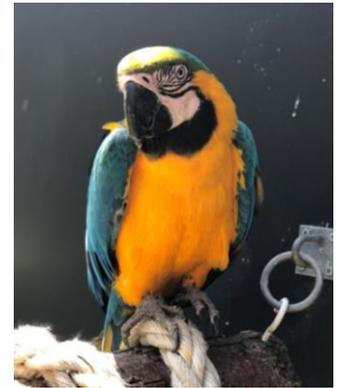


Figure 3: Jacky



Figure 4: The Avitorium from above

Training plan

We started the process of this training already in the indoor enclosure in the old location. We started our training with: stepping up unto our hands, station training, weigh training and small distance flying toward our hands. So the basics of the training were covered there. And we started to connect

with them and they with us and with each other. Already in the indoor enclosure we saw differences in the way they flew.

After they moved into their new enclosure, we made a plan to train our goal step by step.

- Station training in their aviary
- Desensitization in the arena on hand or by giving them free time in the arena
- Teach them to fly towards us through the door
- Teach a que to go back into the aviary



Figure 5: Training in the old shed

It should be noted, that our arena is covered by a net. So we do not have to worry that they will fly away and we can give them the opportunity to practice their flying in the arena.

This plan worked for our 4 young ones, that have never been clipped. They already build up skills on landing and flying in the old shed, and they were very confident in their skills. By the time they were used to the arena they loved going there and just fly around. They flew very quickly through the door and they land wherever they want. Kruimel loves to 'land' upside down on the net.

But for Piet, Loes and Jacky this was not the case. They were not confident and flying through the door didn't seem to work. Taking them on the hand through the arena was ok. But if they got startled and started flying, they then crashed on the ground or against the wall. After this they were in some kind of shock and wouldn't do anything anymore. We had to pick them up and carry them back to their aviaries, soothing them all the way. So for them we had to rethink our plan. And change the antecedents.



Figure 6: Soothing after a crash landing

Changes to the plan and the arena

The first change we made was the way they had to go through the door. At first they had to start from a rope and they had no solid point to go to. So we changed the rope to a solid bar and we put a bar just outside the door. So it would be an easy small flight.

Flying through the door could now be trained in smaller steps.

Also we didn't train them altogether anymore. We put the 4 ones in their inside enclosure and trained with the 3 older ones (or the other way around). This gave us more individual attention to the more scared ones.

This already helped a bit. Piet got more confident. But Jacky and Loes still get panicked after longer flights and crash landings. And they still couldn't get through the door by themselves. So more changes had to be made.



Figure 8: Change 2

change to practise. Sometimes when the landing doesn't go as planned she still gets into the shock state, but this happens less and less. Also going back in gets easier. Piet knows how to fly to the climbing station and gets in by himself. Loes we still have to carry in. Jacky comes out voluntarily once in a while. But the flying is still not very good. She still panics quite a lot and we still have to carry her back in.

Our last change is making another high perch in the arena for the birds to land on. This time on the opposite site of the arena. This gives the macaws more options to land and they can look at the wind etc to decide where to go.

This last change helped Piet and Loes a lot. They have somewhere to go to after they climbed out of their aviary and from there they can also fly back to the climbing perch to get back into the aviary. This gives them more control over the situation and they come out more often and start to fly a lot



Figure 7: Change 1

The second change we made was quite accidental. We put up a high bar in the arena for one of our other birds. But it seemed a good landing place for our macaws. Even for Loes.

The third change we made had to do with going through the door. Apparently flying was too difficult, so we made a rope from the aviary to the arena so the macaws could climb out by themselves. This gave them the opportunity to decide themselves if they want to come into the arena or not.

These two changes made a lot of difference. Piet comes out of the aviary by himself if he wants to and starts to practise his flying and landing skills. And since Piet and Loes are a couple Loes follows him quite often. And this gives her also the

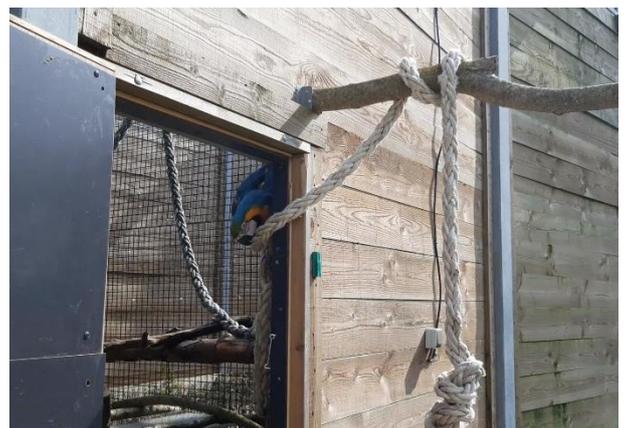


Figure 9: Change 3



Figure 10: Change 4

more. Piet is a good flyer by now. Loes is getting better and better.

Jacky still stays behind a little. She does come out more often. But flying over a larger distance is still hard for her. So we help her as much as we can and we practise the flying with her if she decides to come out. But we do see progress. Mainly because she wants to stay with Huub she comes out more often. The panic/shock state we haven't seen in a while. And we do see a better landing every time she does come out. So practise does help! We still help Jacky by caring her back in if we want the macaws to come back in.

Conclusion and recommendations

The clipping of the wings had a major effect on the flight skills of our macaws. Not clipping our young birds made them expert flyers who can handle themselves even in tougher winds. Clipping after they learned how to fly made an even greater impact than early wing clipping. But through small steps and setting up the environment for success, it is possible to build the skills of flying later on in life. But this takes a while. It requires a lot of positive experiences for the birds to build their confidence, muscles and skills. And you need the opportunity to have them practise in a safe and controlled environment.

Based on my experiences with these 7 macaws, I would never recommend to free fly a macaw that has been clipped before. I would also not recommend clipping a bird. Clipping can be a health risk mentally (Feather Destructive Behaviour (EAZA Parrot Taxon Advisory Group; Ethical considerations on parrots in presentations and current recommendations)) and physically (muscle atrophy (<https://parrotvolancy.com/wing-trimming-physical-health/>)). Flying will be a problem for probably the rest of their lives even after their wings have grown back in, because of these underlying problems.

If you want a macaw as a pet, make sure you do your research. What are the alternatives to wing clipping? What are the possibilities in (free) flying your bird? What do you want to do with your bird? And if you want to free fly your bird, start training as soon as possible. Work on a good connection with your bird and on a strong recall behaviour.

And if you work in a zoological setting try to only fly macaws that have not been clipped. This is so much safer for all. Especially if you are in a free flight demonstration.