

Introducing Your Parrot to Aerobics

Written by Joanie Doss

This article first appeared in the November/December 1992 issue of Parrot World, the publication of the National Parrot Association.

Most birds are bundles of energy. They're a delight to watch as they attack their toys with gusto and perform daring acrobatics. Despite the fact that birds may appear to be expending a great deal of energy, they may not be giving their hearts and lungs the workout they need. Activity shouldn't be confused with beneficial exercise. As a concerned pet owner, have you ever considered providing your "ball of high octane energy" with a regular exercise program to help insure that your pet will achieve its optimum life span.

Birds in the wild fly many miles every day. They usually fly from their roosts to forage for food and return again in the evening to roost. They do a lot of climbing in their daily quest for food. While unclipped birds in a large aviary come closer to the natural movements of a wild bird, a clipped, caged bird does not. Birds used for breeding lead a somewhat more "aerobic" life unless they're kept in small cages. Breeders should be housed in cages that are roomy enough so that they can easily flap their wings comfortably. They may flap with such vigor and force that they produce noticeable noise with their wings. This is a territorial behavior called "drumming" and provides the heart and lungs with a good workout.

As a pet bird becomes older, it tends to put on weight. It acquires the savvy to get people to give it treats and tidbits of food in return for endearing bits of behavior. A cycle begins. The parrot starts to get heavier 90 it feels less like exercising, and because it becomes less active, it becomes heavier. Does this sound like someone we know?

It's hard not to give in to a pet bird's pleas for a treat. When any visitor walks into my bird room/workroom, my birds all have their own ways of getting people to give them something to eat. Pepper, my older Blue-fronted Amazon uses the direct approach as he demands, "Polly wants a cracker." Kodiak, my two year old Blue-front, prefers a more subtle appeal. He stands in the front corner of his cage in spread-eagle fashion, cocks his head, and convincingly as possible says, "I'm a good boy." Should anyone be a bit slow in responding with a treat, he impatiently adds, "Come on, come on." If he is still ignored, he'll put his foot through the bars of his cage and grab you if he can. He's a young bird, so weight isn't a problem yet, but it soon might be. I finally decided to train them to stay in place and flap their wings on command. To do this, I place a bird on a dowel stick, give the command to fly, and then move the dowel from my right to my left. I return it again and repeat the whole procedure several times. The bird gets to flap his wings at least five times for each pass I make. I do this thirty times for each of the birds. I do ten passes, let the bird rest, do ten again and let the bird rest, then do a final ten passes.

Because I had older, fat birds, I was careful to start slowly with their exercise. At first, they only did five passes. Both Pepper and T.J. would breathe very heavily when they first began. Pepper loved doing this right from the start. He could hardly wait each morning for me to take him out for his flying exercise. T.J. disliked the exercise at first. When I would take him out of his cage, he would cock his head and try to get me to scratch under his chin an attempt to delay the start of his exercise period. At first, he barely flapped his wings. But after a month, he began to show an improvement in strength and stamina, and now he's really eager for his exercise. His wing movements are deep and full, and he becomes very excited when it's time to exercise. All of the birds have now become almost as eager to do their flying exercise as they are to eat.

Exercise has as many benefits for birds as it does for humans. Kodiak, who is a phobic bird, becomes easier to handle, and is better able to keep his fears under control after his morning exercise. He looks forward to his flying time and jiggles the latch of the door to his cage if he thinks I'm taking too long to get to him.

Pepper's wind has improved. I can hear his increased heart rate after ten passes. But it quickly returns to normal again just like the heart rate of a well conditioned human. I was surprised to find that he enjoyed this 90 much because he's a fat bird and is generally inactive in his cage or on his playpen. In the evenings, he prefers to sit with me rather than play with his toys on the play gym or T-stand.

Sidney, my three year old Nape, was a highly excitable biter. He was sold to me as a two year old because he was starting to become unmanageable. Sidney doesn't have a mean bone in his body, but he is a high strung, high energy guy. The flying exercise helps to keep a lid on his emotions and gives him an outlet for all that energy.

As stated before, T.J. didn't like this exercise at first. I progressed very slowly with him because he has an internal growth between his heart and lung, and I didn't want him to have any problems. In fact, I started him with only three passes and he probably flapped his wings about twice on each of them. Now he flaps his wings about five times on each of thirty passes. He's getting a glow to his feathers and he's starting to talk more again.

Maggie, my four year old Nape, was always in good shape. He adds his own specialty to this exercise. Some mornings when he feels extra good, he swings around the dowel so that he hangs upside down and flies that way for several passes. He had been getting lazy about his talking, but now I give him his exercise, then work on his speech while he's still excited from his activity. He's beginning to improve at speaking on command again.

I believe that this simple exercise has done a lot to improve the life of my birds. Not only does it seem to be having both physical and emotional benefits for them, but they enjoy it as well. Whoever said, "No pain, no gain!"

Training Your bird to Fly in Place There are two things your bird must learn how to do before you can have him fly in place on a dowel. He must be (1) stick trained, and (2) he must be able to flap his wings on command.

Stick Training

You must begin with a dowel or stick that's a little smaller than your bird's perch. He needs to be able to grasp the dowel firmly and feel secure while flapping his wings. For directions on the actual process of stick training please see Parrot World, May/June '92. Flapping Wings on Command

Place your bird on your arm or on a dowel. When it is secure, bring your arm or dowel down quickly. Your bird will raise its wings to keep its balance. When it does this, give it your command word and praise it even if it only raises its wings slightly. You may also want to reward your bird with a bite of its favorite food, or a scratch on the head if it enjoys that. Each time you lower your arm or dowel, say "Fly" or whatever will be your own command word. Remember to praise and reward your parrot each time it responds to your command. Once your bird has gotten the idea that he is to flap his wings when you command, it's time to start him on his exercise.

With your bird held almost shoulder high on the dowel, quickly move it in front of you from your right side to your left. If your bird appears frightened by this, move him slowly until he realizes he's not going to get hurt. If he shows no fear, but refuses to flap his wings, bring the stick down quickly and to your left simultaneously. If your bird still refuses to flap its wings, revert to using the downward movement only and praise him for every attempt he makes to lift his wings. This means he still hasn't learned what you mean when you say, "Fly." All birds learn at different rates, so don't rush him. This is not a race to see how fast you can get your bird to do something. Some birds will fly in place immediately when you just move the stick from your right to your left; others will always need to be brought down and to your left as explained above.

After you've moved him from your right to your left, return him slowly, bringing him back to the right. He will be backwards as you move, so don't go too quickly or you might scare him. After a while, some birds actually seem to really enjoy being returned quickly. But not all birds appreciate this, so gradually increase the speed of this motion while observing your bird's reaction carefully.

Not all birds will take to this exercise with enthusiasm. Some birds will nip more often as their exercise makes them more excited. Others will find it a good outlet for their excess energy and will nip less. What works for some birds may not for others. Even if I could physically show you how I do this, your timing might be off a few seconds from mine and your results could be different. Your relationship with your own bird would obviously be different than mine, so again we could have two different responses.

For the exercise to be of physical benefit to your bird, it should flap its wings at least five times every time you bring the dowel from your right to your left (one pass). He should be able to do about twenty to thirty of these passes a day when he's in good condition.

For the sake of your bird's health, you must remember to start slowly. No more than five passes a day, even if he's only flapping his wings two or three times on each pass. Gradually work up to more flaps and passes. I check my birds' breathing and heart rate after ten passes and wait for a return to normal before progressing further. If your bird is a non-biter, you can put your ear near his chest or even at his back and you'll hear his heartbeat after several passes. Please remember never to force your bird to exercise while it's ill or recovering from an illness.

Since this exercise will strengthen your bird's wings, you'll have to keep a close eye on its flight feathers as they grow because this could help him become a stronger flyer. It will also make his heart and lungs stronger. I feel satisfied that this exercise has improved the health of my birds. Try it for yourself and see what you find.

Alternatives for Older Birds or Birds with Bad Feet If the bird has sores on the bottom of its feet, or its pads are worn from old age, you may want to substitute your hand or a padded stick for the regular dowel. If the bird does not grasp the dowel firmly, he can cause excessive wear to the bottom of his feet.

Band Method

If the bird is gentle, have him step onto your index (pointer) finger and the area between your finger and thumb. Clamp your thumb over his front toes. This will keep him on your hand and give him a feeling of security that he won't fall when he is flapping his wings.

Padded Dowel

If your bird is not gentle or tame enough for holding him on your hand, glue some acrylic pile fabric to a dowel to form a cushion for his feet. He will probably have to be introduced to the fabric dowel gradually because he will be hesitant to step onto an unfamiliar object.

NPA member, Joanie Doss, lives in Anchorage, Alaska, where she cares for seven Amazons, and watches for bears that stroll the streets and wandering moose who enjoy eating hanging baskets of fuschia on her front porch during the summer. She's a regular contributor to her local club's newsletter, and her articles have appeared often in major avicultural publications.