

# How did they train that?

TRAINING YOUR PARROT TO RECALL

By Linda (Raz) Rasmussen



Photo credit: Shane Hancock

**T**hese are the basic steps for teaching flighted recall (flying to you on cue). Flying indoors or in an aviary is an excellent form of exercise and enrichment. Training recall is important for daily life with a flighted bird and can also be expanded into a variety of games or tricks you can both enjoy. For any bird, clipped or flighted, it's also an important safety measure to train your bird to come when called in case of an escape. Many clipped birds have been known to fly off, even with trimmed feathers.

For a young, fledged bird, recall can be trained quickly. For an older bird, one not used to flying, or one who was not fledged as a baby, it can take several months to a year or more to train. You can also teach this with some modification to birds who are clipped. With slightly clipped birds, focus on walking recalls and short hops.



*It's an important safety measure to train your bird to come when called, in case of an escape.*

Photo credit: Barbara Heidenreich



Barb Saunders' Bare-Eyed Cockatoo, Daphne, enjoying a vacation.  
Photo Credit: Linda Rasmussen/Barb Saunders

The important thing is to make it fun and go at the bird's pace. In the end, you will have a bird who is more confident, better able to find his way back to you in case of an accidental fly off, and can respond to a "Come Here!" cue.

Before you start, familiarize yourself with basic training methods for birds from one of the Good Bird Inc. DVD's or books about clicker training (Melinda Johnson's *Getting Started: Clicker Training for Birds* is a good one). Teaching your bird to "target" is an essential first skill, and will help your bird "learn to learn." The guidelines below are adapted for the companion parrot owner from professional methods, and follow the principle of training using the most positive, least intrusive techniques possible

## TREATS AND FEEDING

It will help if you give all food outside of meals as training treats, so there are no "freebies." Get the bird used to the idea that food 1) comes from you, and 2) comes when he flies to you. Many birds find this a great game as well and a fun way to interact with you.

Make mealtime the final reward for a great training session. Let your bird watch you prepare his meal as it can be great incentive and put him in the training mood! Then begin your session.

## HOW TO START

If your bird is clipped or not used to flying, start at step one. If your bird will already fly a few feet or more, you can start with step two.

For each training session, work only as long as your bird remains interested. At first this may only be a few minutes. Later session may last from ten to twenty minutes. Don't call repeatedly. If your bird does not respond within a few seconds, don't cue again, just lower your hand. Find the distance at which he will respond quickly and practice flying to the cue with quick response. Gradually increase the distance between you and your bird. If you are working through steps one through three with a clipped or previously clipped bird, you may need to give a lot of encouragement to get those first hops. Ask for them a few times each session, then go back to a distance your bird can handle. Always end on a positive note. This means the last repetition in the session is one that your bird has mastered, no matter how small.

## 1. WALKING RECALL

Start with your bird on a flat surface in an area with few distractions. Allow the bird to walk to you and step up onto your hand. Bridge and reinforce when the bird steps up onto your hand. Gradually increase the distance the bird walks to a few feet. This will help give the bird the idea of coming to you from a distance, not just stepping up when a hand is there. Start using your chosen cue (i.e., "come here!" or a hand cue) when you start getting the desired behavior.

## 2. STRRRRETCHING RECALL

Start from a countertop edge or perch. Instead of putting your hand right up to the bird to step up, put it a few inches away so the bird has to stretch his legs to step to get on your hand. When the bird steps onto your hand, bridge and reinforce. Repeat a few times, as long as the bird is interested. Try to stop before the bird loses interest.

For each repetition, place your hand further away from the perch so the bird has to really stretch to get to your hand. Eventually he will make a small jump to get to it. Bridge and reinforce.



*Getting the first launch into flight can be difficult for some birds.  
Photo credit: Shane Hancock*

## FOR BIRDS NOT PROPERLY FLEDGED OR NON-FLYING BIRDS:

If your bird has been clipped and/or was not fledged properly, these steps may take much longer than for a flighted or fledged bird. It can still be done by starting with walking and small distances requiring only small jumps, and working very gradually to build up both skills and confidence as the flight feathers grow in. It may help to start jumps from flat surfaces like a countertop rather than from a perch or by having the bird come to a sturdy perch right in front of you rather than to your hand. Never force or trick a bird into flying. The goal is to build confidence and trust by allowing the bird to make his own choices.

With birds who have not fledged properly or have not flown much, confidence is just as important as the actual flight skills. If there is hesitation at any step (new distance, new height, etc.) go back in your approximations to where the bird is comfortable. It works well to do lots of recalls at comfortable distances, then gradually upping the criteria.

Also, when teaching flight skills and recall (they're not the same thing), sometimes it can be necessary to work on each separately. You can do one whole session of easy recalls, just to get and keep that behavior well trained. Then do another later when you work some of the more difficult skills.



*Learning to land is one step in training a flighted recall.  
Photo credit: Shane Hancock*

If your bird was not fledged properly, this first jump may take some time, especially if he has had unpleasant experiences trying to fly in the past. While working on the transition between stretching and jumping, keep your bird interested in participating by switching back and forth between stretching recalls and asking for a distance that will require a short jump. Always end with something the bird has done successfully. A lot of verbal encouragement at this point can also help a lot. See the article by Mandy Andrea in this issue for more techniques that can be used to help at this stage.

### 3. JUMPING-FLAPPING RECALL (1-2 FEET)

When the bird is comfortable stretching and jumping to come to you from a short distance, move your hand

a little farther away. The little jump will turn into a little jump with wing flapping and then bigger jumps with flapping. If your bird balks at an increase in distance and won't do it, reduce the distance a little. You may only be able to increase the distance one or two increments per session (sometimes not at all). Make sure the bird is getting reinforced each session, so he doesn't get discouraged, that is, set your bird up so he can succeed. The increases in distance are in increments of inches, not feet.

### 4. SHORT FLIGHT RECALL (3-8 FEET)

Gradually increase the distances your bird must jump so that using his wings become more essential. For a medium-sized bird, such as an African grey, more than about two feet will require more than just jumping

or flapping. At first these will still be increases in distance of just a few inches at a time. Once he is actually getting a little lift, you can increase the distance by six to ten inches at a time, then up to a foot at a time. But remember, quick response to your cue is important. If the bird is reluctant to try an increase in distance, move closer to the bird. If there is hesitation beyond a certain distance, do increments that are almost imperceptible.

At this stage, if the bird was not fledged properly, there will be a lot of work to do on braking (putting the tail feathers down) and landing (getting the feet down at the appropriate time). You're actually training two different things now: flight skills and recall.

This stage probably requires the most patience for a bird who has not been flying regularly. Doing lots of practice is the key, so that 1) the recall becomes almost automatic, and 2) the bird gets very confident in his abilities. Repetition is a fantastic builder of confidence as well as skills.

## 5. FLYING UP AND DOWN

When your bird is able to fly longer distances (six to eight feet), start varying the height and direction. For example, ask the bird to fly up to your hand or down to your hand. Flying down is especially important and a bird who has not flown in large areas before will have to learn this skill; it's not innate. Start with very short height differences (less than a foot) and work up gradually.

Flying up from the ground is another skill you can include. It requires a lot of strength and is a great way to build up flight muscles. Start small (less than a foot) and increase distance gradually.

## 6. LONGER FLIGHTED RECALL

When the bird is flying the length of a room, start increasing the difficulty by asking him to turn around corners, go into different rooms, fly up and down stairs, etc. Turning is also a learned skill, as is slowing down and landing. Again, every new level of difficulty should be practiced incrementally, and if the bird hesitates, go back to the last step he presented well for awhile.

To teach a bird to turn corners, stand near a corner or doorway that will eventually require a 90-degree turn. Start positioned so that he can fly almost directly to you, then position yourself around the corner or into the doorway so he has to start turning a little bit to get to your hand. With birds who did not fledge properly or are not used to flying, the increments may have to be very tiny.

## 7. BIG INDOOR RECALL

When the bird is recalling reliably in the house (around corners, into different rooms, flying down, coming to you when you are out of sight) try to find a large indoor area or enclosed flight cage where you can practice longer recalls and flying down from greater heights. Start with short distances again and work up to longer ones and greater heights. This kind of practice will help if your bird gets outside accidentally.

Trained flight is an excellent form of exercise, enrichment, and empowerment for companion birds. Especially with birds who have not flown before or who have been clipped for some time, the exuberance with which they start those first small flights is a joy to watch. Depending on the bird, even adult learners can become adept flyers when trained with patience to build their skills and confidence.

For more about training and living with flighted birds, see Carly Lu's Flight Blog. (<http://likambo.com/flyblog>)

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