

## Learning How Professionals at NEI Train Birds to Fly Outdoors Safely

By Deb Stambul

I was lucky enough to participate in an advance workshop at NEI: [www.naturalencounters.com](http://www.naturalencounters.com). One of the workshop activities is demonstrating basic flight training protocol used by this group of professionals. I am not suggesting that the training plan we used at NEI is enough to teach your bird to fly outside. There are just too many variables between each bird. They are as Dr. Susan Friedman says, “a study of one.” It takes an exceptional skill as a trainer, a solid relationship with a bird skilled in flight, and perfect conditions to fly your bird successfully outside.

Steve Martin says, “Before taking any bird outside it must demonstrate skill and confidence in flying in at least three of our large enclosed training areas. The bird must respond without hesitation to our cue to fly to us the full distance of each training cage. Plus, the bird’s flight behavior must be so well generalized to new environments that it performs the long distance flights without any time to desensitize to the new environments. Only after the bird demonstrates that it has outstanding flight skill (ability to land on any perch it chooses, ability to adjust its flight pattern while in the air and in response to changing wind and other environmental conditions, etc.) outstanding flight confidence (shows inclination to fly short distances rather than walk, performs long flights without hesitations, etc.) and outstanding motivation (relationship with it’s trainer, understanding of positive consequences associated with flight, etc.) do we ever take a bird outside.”

The workshops are designed to teach the participants to develop better understanding of their bird’s behavior and learn skills associated with modifying behavior, handling parrots, and solving problems. Steve says, “We strongly discourage people from flying their birds outside. In the advanced workshop we teach people how we fly



Deb and macaw

our birds outside because, (1) We want them to see how difficult it is so that they will be discouraged to try it, and (2) in case they ever do try it, they will have the proper understanding of the process and will do it right.”

### *The Advanced Workshop Experience:*

First we were paired with another participant and one of the experienced professional trainers at NEI as our



Kathryne and Hyacinth

instructor for the week. My partner was Janet Shelton, and our training instructor was Rob Bules, a professional trainer working with Steve for 11 years. He, as did Steve, began flying birds outside through his personal experience as a Falconer.

We were then assigned two birds to work with for the week, one for flight training, and one each for training

other behaviors such as husbandry, medical and enrichment behaviors. The birds selected to fly outside were housed in an aviary that was 25 feet wide, 20 feet high, and 60 feet long. They had plenty of experience flying before we used them in the workshop. The flight skills in the aviary included flying onto a variety of perches, different distances and angles, and to make quick decisions about flight paths to avoid obstacles and other birds.

With the birds we were to fly outside, our first step was to build trust by having it take treats from our hands. There was always a full bowl of food available for the bird giving it a choice to take food from us or go to its bowl. Once there was no hesitation from the bird in taking the treat we moved to having the bird step up onto our hand to get the treat, then step back down and get another treat.

Once fluent stepping on and off our hands, we stepped back a few inches and had the bird hop onto our flat open hand for the treat. We would turn our hand and face the bird toward the perch and cue the bird to step down and reward this behavior. We continued to increase the distance so that the bird would fly to reach our hand for the treat. Once the bird was flying to our hand for its treat we would turn our hand and send it with a cue to fly back to the perch. Janet and I alternated doing these repetitions so that the bird was comfortable with both of us. When this behavior was fluent through many repetitions we moved to a large tent made of mesh netting. Here we had room for the bird to fly from one trainer’s hand to the other trainer’s hand. We continued to extend the distance for the bird to fly. The flat open palm created a comfortable landing surface for the bird. The treat was held near our wrist but far enough away that the bird would not hit our hand holding the treat when it landed, but could reach it easily. We started

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with about 5 feet between us with each repetition we would increase our distance, eventually reaching about 20 to 30 feet apart. Flying is a high-energy behavior to ask of a bird. When it began to breath heavily or would hesitate to leave one hand to fly to the other, the training session would stop. The bird was returned to its aviary with a treat and time to rest. We would move to one of our other birds to build our skills training other behaviors.

Later in the day we would return to one of the tents to do more repetitions of flying from Janet to myself. We worked on generalizing flying in different large tents and down hallways inside a large building where aviaries reside, all safe areas to retrieve a bird should it become uncomfortable and fly off. We taught the bird to land at different locations using large T-Stand type perches about 10 feet high by turning our hand and giving the cue for send while one of our team would stand behind the T-Stand and display a treat. When the bird would land on the stand it would receive its treat.

### ***The Day Our Birds Went Outside:***

The day came for all of us to generalize our birds and their flight skills to the outside. The birds now had fluency in flying back and forth between participants in multiple locations, fluent landing skills on the outside T-Stands, and solid history with the participants as treat dispensers. Without these skills being 100% fluent, no bird would have been allowed to attempt an outside flight. The wind direction and velocity were checked, making sure we would be able to fly our birds into the wind where they would have the most flight control, and the breeze was calm.

We took turns flying our beautiful macaws back and forth between us under the open sky. Kathyne Thorpe and Ann Brooks, two workshop participants, stepped up and positioned themselves to do the flight exercise

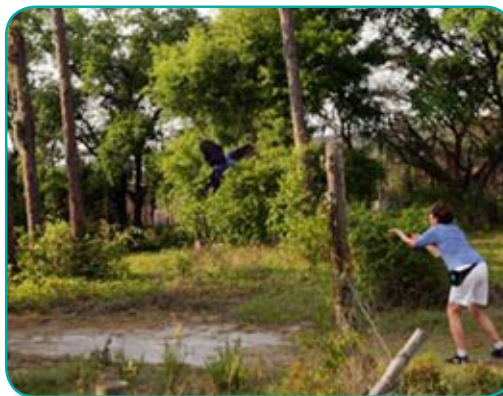


with their young Hyacinth Macaw. After several successful flights a side gust of wind caught the bird, as it was about to land on Kathyne's hand and off, it flew. (See photos) We all stood and watched this beautiful blue bird



fly high into a Pine tree.

The trainers that work with Steve Martin sprang into action with their



walkie-talkies immediately spreading out in all directions to become spotters. The rest of us were sent to distant corners in a circle around the bird to keep our eyes focused on the bird just in case it should take off. The bird's companion was brought out to the bottom of the tree in a large travel

cage, and it immediately began to call.

Because of building a strong history of positive reinforcement with the bird over the past week Kathyne was chosen to stand a few feet of distance from the bottom of the tree with her arm outstretched showing the bird a handful of it's favorite treats. This way the bird could fly at an angle to reach Kathyne not directly down. The bird tried to fly down several times but it was young and had not developed its flying skills enough for the difficult maneuver of flying down. Finally several hours later the bird took off flew down and landed on Kathyne's hand, receiving a jackpot of treats. It was then placed in the travel cage with its mate and taken back to its aviary. The rest of us all went out for adult beverages, especially Kathyne.

### ***Conclusion***

In closing I would like to quote Steve with his thoughts about flying birds outside. *"I teach people in our advanced workshops how to fly birds outside. I do this because I want them to learn the length we go to insure the safety of our birds. People see us flying birds in our shows and it looks easy. I want people to see how hard and how dangerous it is, and how much work we put into making it look easy while at the same time protecting our birds from harm."*

A special thank you to Dr. Susan Friedman, Steve Martin, and Margo Rose for their generous contributions to this article.

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*South Bay Bird Society wishes to thank Deb Stambul for her very informative article for our newsletter.*

*All photos provided by Deb Stambul.*