

Re-revolutionizing Aviculture, One Bird At A Time

By Nate Waddoups

Part 1 - Introduction

For centuries, the only parrots outside of their natural wild habitats were kept in large aviaries, or, unfortunately, small cages. It is no coincidence that the practice of wing clipping coincided with an explosion in the numbers of parrots kept as companions in homes. The advent of wing clipping created a revolution in aviculture, enabling people not wealthy enough to afford aviaries or cold-hearted enough to condemn birds to small cages, to own, train, breed, and share their homes with parrots.

In recent times, clipping has been standard practice for most aviculturists. Most birds in the pet trade are clipped before their owners ever see them, and most owners have only seen their birds make short descending flights, flapping with all their might as they make their way to the floor. Wing clipping has enabled more people than ever before to share their lives with parrots, and has been considered standard practice for so long that few people seriously consider doing otherwise. The few known stories of pet birds taking flight have typically ended with the loss of the bird, which appears to cement the importance of clipped wings.

In the last few years, however, another revolution has been quietly building. Stories are popping up here and there of pet parrots whose wings aren't clipped. What's more, these are often not the sad stories of lost birds that most people expect, but rather happy stories of birds that fly to their owners for play during the day and fly to their cages at night when they want to sleep. There are even people out there who allow their birds to fly outdoors, day after day.

It's enough to make a person with a clipped parrot wonder - is the grass really greener on the other side? As stories spread of people with flighted birds, people who have a long-standing practice of clipping their birds' wings are realizing that clipping is a choice, not a requirement.

At one end of the spectrum, most people clip their birds' wings. In the middle are the people who allow their birds to fly, but only indoors, in their homes or perhaps in aviaries or other enclosed spaces. At the far end of the spectrum are those few people who allow their birds to fly free in the great outdoors.

Of those three options, outdoor flight requires by far the greatest commitment to training, and has by far the greatest risk to the bird's life. However, I have met few parrots as lively, healthy, and confident as those I know that fly outside regularly, and few people as knowledgeable about aviculture as those who have trained their birds to fly free day after day. Because I am not qualified to speak of the issues faced by those who fly their birds outside, this series shall be concerned only with indoor-flighted companions.

Indoor-flighted parrots do face new risks that are nonexistent or negligible for clipped parrots - and so do their owners. Flighted birds can move around in ways that clipped birds can't. While a T-stand might be sufficient to keep a clipped bird out of trouble, it doesn't confine a flighted bird any more than a chair confines a healthy human. This increased mobility makes it that much more challenging to protect our birds from the dangers of our homes, and to protect our homes from the dangers of birds.

The average house is not safe for a flighted bird, so people who choose to live with flighted birds need to make some changes. Ceiling fans need to be disabled, and windows need to be covered with blinds or curtains to prevent birds from colliding with them. Sharp objects must be kept in drawers. Stoves present another hazard. While cooking it's probably best to cage

the bird, or at least block its access to the kitchen, to prevent any mishaps. Of course most importantly, doors to the outside must be closed, always. This is not a complete list – let common sense be your guide.

On the other hand, clipped birds also face dangers unique to their condition. For example, it's almost unheard of for a flighted bird to break a blood feather. Clipped birds break blood feathers for two reasons: first, and most obvious, they fall. Flighted birds almost never fall - instead, they fly! Second, even if a flighted bird does fall, it's at much lower risk of feather breakage because a growing blood feather will have the support of the feathers around it. Flighted birds are also less likely to endure keel injuries or head injuries from falling.

It's also widely suspected - though admittedly not yet conclusively proven - that wing clipping may be a contributing factor to many of the behavioral disorders commonly seen in captive parrots. Wild parrots rarely bother walking or running away from a threat or a startling event, instead they fly up to a safe altitude and re-assess the threat from the safety of the skies. Wing clipping robs a parrot of this instinctual means of escape from a stressful situation. Consequently, a clipped parrot in the presence of a suspected threat faces far more stress than a flighted parrot in the wild would ever experience - the stress of the threat itself, the stress of not being able to immediately escape and the stress of continued and/or close proximity to the threat. Wild birds don't stay near things that worry them – they don't have to.

The most pronounced difference between a flighted and clipped bird is that clipped birds are very dependent upon their owners, whereas flighted birds are much more independent. Contrary to common wisdom, flighted birds do not necessarily become wild or ignore their owners, but they can take care of themselves to a degree that clipped birds cannot. They can fly to their food and water dishes when they are hungry or thirsty. They can fly to their favorite perch if they want to play with a toy that hangs there. They can fly to their owners when they want their heads scratched.

Clipped birds are generally confined to perches, and depend upon their owners for transportation from one place to another; flighted birds, once out of their cages, can go wherever they please. This freedom is rewarding for both birds and owners. It's rewarding for the birds because they have the freedom to avoid stressful situations and the freedom to fly to attractive situations. It's rewarding to the owners because flighted birds can express their appreciation for their owners in ways the clipped birds can't. We've all seen clipped birds leaning towards us from across the room, but it's surprising just how special it feels to have a bird fly to you from across the room, just for the sake of being with you.

Wing clipping became popular in aviculture primarily for commercial reasons. By reducing these magnificent flighted creatures to mere pedestrians, parrot sellers were easily able to persuade prospective customers that parrots would fit right into their homes with little or no adjustment. In a pet store full of clipped birds, the shop owner can place a baby bird right into a prospective customer's hands and neither of them need know anything about training or the needs of a flighted creature. But we all know - even those of us with clipped birds - how much adjustment it really takes to live with a parrot. Overflowing rescues and sanctuaries are a testament to the degree to which many buyers underestimate their companions' needs.

Perhaps if prospective bird owners saw birds as roaming animals that interact with humans only when they feel like it, and not as pedestrians that can be easily confined to perches and interacted with when the owner feels like it, fewer birds would be sold to people who underestimate the need for training and positive interaction. Rescues would be tasked with rehabilitating birds only from a few people facing dramatic life changes, not from hundreds or thousands of unprepared buyers.

It is my hope that aviculture will experience a second revolution, undoing the tradition established by the first one, inviting bird owners to allow their birds to remain flighted, and to

replace a reliance on wing trimming tools with a reliance on strong healthy relationships with their birds. This revolution will proceed one bird at a time - would you like to join us?

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