Flying Birds of Prey Prior to Release

Yvonne Marie Sitko
Western Australian Birds of Prey Centre
Whiteman Park, WA
0438 388 383
Email: wabopc@westnet.com.au

Introduction

As wildlife carers our main aim is to diagnose, treat, assess and return our native birds of prey back into the wild as quickly as possible. The length of time a bird remains in captivity is determined by the severity of the injury and the amount of rehabilitation required for this bird to return to it original health.

During the rehabilitation process a bird of prey can lose condition very quickly. Three to four weeks in captivity, a bird can loose up to 70% of it fitness. Over longer periods of time muscle tone can change making the bird of prey physically incapable of performing at optimum levels on release.

The final stage of the rehabilitation process, when dealing with birds of prey, should include some form of fitness/exercise training. It is important that these birds are returned to their natural environment in the best possible physical condition in order to survive. However this should not be done at the expense of the birds themselves by releasing them to late or too early or with the lack of fitness needed.

This presentation is to help assist carers with the knowledge in assessing the condition of birds of prey and to offer new methods of fitness/exercise training to provide a successful release.

Assessment

After the initial treatment, the final state of rehabilitation is to assess the bird before release. Assessing fitness levels and overall condition can be observed while looking into the aviary. Even after a few short flights in an aviary, if you notice the bird has struggled to land safely, has drooped wings or gaping and looking overall tired, it is considered to be in an unfit condition for release. Do keep in mind on a very hot day birds can present these behaviors by trying to expire heat. Always assess in normal conditions.

Standard posture

Posture showing lack of fitness (Wings dropped, gaping)

A Peregrine Falcon showing effects from an injury on left wing.
This injury was only evident with free flying.

Fitness levels and fitness training

Once the bird has recovered form it injures, the muscle tone and fitness levels needs to be assessed. Any bird of prey in captivity for 3-4 weeks will loose fitness. 1-2 months and the bird have lost significant muscle tone to affect its performance

In order to return rehabilitated bird of prey back into their natural environment, we need to understand the species flying style, hunting techniques and other natural behaviors of the species. This information will assist us in using the most effective fitness and exercise training methods to ensure the survival of the bird.

With some species the fitness program can be simple others species, it can be complicated and time consuming. The species and the length of time in captivity will determine the fitness/exercise program needed. The longer in captive the more the fitness required. When making a decision on developing a fitness/exercise program, one needs to consider time, knowledge and experience.

There are four main methods of fitness/exercise training. Each method will achieve a certain fitness level, in some cases enough for the survival of the species. The decision on the method of fitness training should be based on the species. For example a bird of prey that chases its prey, (Falcon), will need a great deal more fitness and muscle tone in order for it to survive than a bird of prey that spends most of its time scavenging (Kite). Therefore different methods of training should be used for different bird of prey. (Refer to the recommended exercising method with birds of prey). Where possible a combination of method will produce more effective results.

Flight Aviaries

This non contact method of exercise is ideal for some species or when hacking from an aviary. Providing you have a suitable aviary, (larger the aviary the better) training is as simple as moving yourself from one side of the aviary to the other and allowing the bird to retreat to the opposite end. The bird's fitness will improve with repeated exercise. If the bird is crashing into the opposite end of the aviary, causing damage discontinue method. Alternatively try a larger aviary or move yourself at a slower pace.

Method

The recommended process for aviary training is to start off with up to 5 fights for the first week and building up to 40 fights over a four week period. This will increase the bird's stamina, fitness and develop muscle tone. Indicators on the stamina and fitness of the bird is determined by the number of flights achieved before becoming tired and the recovery rate for the bird to stop panting (gaping) and its heart rate to return to normal. As the weeks progress you will see an improvement with both the flying times and recovery rate. If the bird is struggling with the number of flights during the training session, reduced the number of flights and increase the number at a slower rate. Alternatively if the bird is showing no signs of tiredness increase the number of flights accordingly. This information can be measured and tabled to see the progress with training. Recommendation on the size of the fight aviary for small birds of prey is 25m and for large birds of prey 50m.

Monthly table for training Birds of Prey

Week 1	No. flights	Time taken (min)	Recovery time (min)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

Week 2	No. flights	Time taken (min)	Recovery time (mln)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

Week 3	No. flights	Time taken (min)	Recovery time (min)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

Week 4	No. flights	Time taken (min)	Recovery time (min)
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			

Verticals

This process requires a great deal more time and involves placing equipment on the bird, attaching the bird to a creance line, slowly reducing weight and socializing the bird (manning). This method is achieved by first gaining the trust by the bird. Initial trust has been achieved when the bird is able to feed of the glove. The final training process is when a bird will jump from a platform (perch) to an unstable perch (your glove). The idea of the creance line is so the bird cannot fly away should something unexpected happen.

By encouraging the bird to fly from a low perch to a higher perch directly above with food rewards, works the pectoral muscles the major fight muscles in a bird of prey. The same aviary fight routine then applies. Start off with up to with 5 verticals for the first week, then working up to about 50 verticals in one training session. The height can also increase from 1 meter to 3 meters during the month. Results can be tabled and the bird's progress can be assessed.

Long flights - Line work

This method has similar preparation to the vertical training. The main difference is the bird is flying from a perch to the glove over a long distance. The distance and number of flights are increased over the weeks. Starting off with 2 meters and working up to 40m, long distances can be achieved with this method. Larger birds of prey will require distances up to 100m. Once again the bird remains attached to the creance line. This is so the bird cannot fly off should something unexpected happen.

Line training to the glove

Free flying - Lure work

This is the advanced method of exercising a bird of prey where the bird is flying free, with no line attached, in a natural environment. This method allows the bird to experience all the elements while gaining fitness. However, birds of prey are energy efficient by nature and souring and gliding require little direct effort on the birds' part so the use of a lure may be needed.

The lure consisting of a leather pad attached to a line with a food reward tied to the end. To symbolize realism feathers of a suitable prey species are fixed. A skilled lurer can mimic the twisting turning and dodging movements of avian prey increasing the overall fitness and agility of the bird. The fitness of the bird can be assessed by the number of passes to the lure before becoming tired and the recovery rate on resting. An unfit bird of prey may only be able to make 3 passes to the lure before displaying lethargy, and gaping on the wing. Over the period of the month the number should increase to about 30 passes, all of which are at the bird's maximum speed.

Recommended Exercise Method with Birds of Prey				
Bird of Prey	Flight Aviaries	Verticals	Long flights	Free Flying
All Owls	√			
Large Falcons				√
Australian Hobby				√
Brown Falcon	√	√	√	
Australian Kestrel	√	√		
Black-shouldered Kite	√	√		
Kites	√		√	√
Little Eagles				√
Wedge-tailed Eagle				√
Brown Goshawk	√	√	√	√
Collared Sparrowhawk	√			
Harriers	√			

Summary

Our ultimate goal for a Bird of Prey is to release them back into their native environment in the best possible condition as quickly as possible. Birds of prey, which have spent considerable time in captivity, more than 4 weeks, do need some form of fitness or exercise.

By assessing the bird, developing and executing a fitness/training program, the bird has an increased chance of survival. Live is harsh enough in our environment and if we as carers return our birds of prey back in to the wild in the best possible condition, we are doing our part to ensure its survival.

BIOGRAPHY:

Miss Yvonne Sitko is the owner and operator of the Western Australian Birds of Prey Centre located in Perth at Whiteman Park. Yvonne has been involved in rehabilitation since 2000 and she has traveled to the UK and Singapore, working in a number of centers and over the years has collectively worked with over 150 different species of Birds of Prey.

Since 2005, Yvonne has established the educational Birds of Prey flying displays at Whiteman Park and more recently has developed a partnership with the West Coast Eagles. Miss Sitko has been flying Auzzie, a Wedge-tailed Eagle, at every home game for the WCE. The relationship with the WCE, Auzzie and the Western Australian Birds of Prey Centre has brought awareness to Wedge-tailed Eagle, birds of prey and wildlife in general throughout Australia.

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Collared Sparrowhawk	√			
Harriers	√			

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