

Strategies to Utilize when a Flighted Parrot Escapes

By Barbara Heidenreich

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My blue fronted Amazon parrot, Tarah, does not have clipped wings. However like many birds that were clipped during the fledging process, he has never quite learned the kind of flight skills that might earn him the title of a “flyer”. I often said “He’s has his flight feathers, but he doesn’t fly.” One day I learned, the hard way, that this wasn’t exactly true.

I was visiting my parrots as I was moving from southern California to northern California. When I arrived I brought Tarah in his cage to my old bedroom. I opened the door to the cage to allow my bird some much needed free time. Before I knew it, he bolted off his cage, through the bedroom door, took a right and made his way down the hall. He then banked left and flew through the living room. At that very moment my father was just opening the sliding glass door to step out onto the deck. Guess who went through the door too? The deck was on the second floor, so my bird had two stories of lift to assist him on his grand flight down the fairway of the golf course behind the house. Thank goodness he was a green flying brick. He ran out of gas and slowly descended to the soft green grass before a tree offered its branches as refuge. Juiced by adrenalin, my feet barely touched the ground as I ran after my bird.

I have always been very careful about the choices I make having a flighted bird in the house. But I was very surprised by the amazing flight my bird made on that day. Sometimes birds that we think will never fly do indeed fly. Sometimes birds that have flight feathers trimmed surprise us when feathers return. Sometimes experienced flyers get frightened or find themselves in unfamiliar territory. Whatever the situation, there are some strategies that can be very useful to recovering a bird that has flown to a location undesired by you. The following information is provided to prepare you for that day when your bird may find itself airborne and heading in the wrong direction. These strategies apply if you bird has no flight skills or is a world class flying athlete.

Bird is flying away

Call to your bird loudly as he is flying- it may help him find his way back to you.

As your bird is flying, do not take your eyes off of him. Note the last place you saw him, the level of his flight, how tired he looked. He may have landed in that area. (Radio or phone contact for a group of people searching can be very helpful in this situation. Grab your cell phone!)

Searching for your bird

If you have a group of people, spread out and circle the area you last saw him.

If you cannot locate him, call to him. He may call back. Say words or sounds he knows or mimics. Most parrots are located by their screams.

If he has another bird he likes, put that bird in a cage and bring it to the area you last saw him. Walk away from the bird in the cage. It might encourage the bird in the cage to scream. This may inspire the lost bird to scream. Keep talking to a minimum so you can listen for the

scream.

Look carefully in a limited area (within 1 mile) in the early stages of your search. Parrots usually do not go far unless, blown by the wind, chased by a bird of prey or extremely frightened.

Keep in mind your parrot may see you before you see him. When this happens, parrots are sometimes very quiet. This may be because the parrot is more comfortable now that you are present.

Despite some parrots bright colors, they can be very difficult to see in trees. Look for movement buried in the trees as opposed to your whole bird perched prominently on the tree.

You have located the bird, but he is out of reach

Once you find your bird, relax (unless the bird is in immediate danger.) It is better to let the bird sit where he is (if he is inaccessible) while you work out a strategy. Do not frantically try to grab the bird, chase or scare him down.

If the bird has just landed. He will probably not fly again (if at all) for awhile.

Bring the bird's favorite person and/or favorite bird friend (in a cage) to the area where your bird is located.

Bring favorite food items, familiar food bowls and the bird's cage if possible.

Be careful not to ask your bird to fly from a great height or a steep angle. Try to position yourself (or bird buddy, or bird cage) to allow short flights or short climbs to lower places.

Try to lure your bird to fly or climb to branches/objects that are similar to those upon which he is sitting if possible. A bird may be too frightened to climb onto a distinctly different perch.

(For example, the bird might be afraid to climb off of a tree onto a fence.) If you have no other option, expect the process to be slower and be patient with your bird as he builds his confidence. He may also fly again if he touches the new perch and is frightened by it.

Do not raise unfamiliar objects up to your bird to have him step onto it. More than likely this will only scare your bird to fly farther away. If you have a familiar item, you may have a chance that the bird will step onto it. Keep in mind things like ladders, people climbing trees, cherry pickers etc. may also scare your bird. Go extremely slowly if you resort to using these items. Stop any action if your bird looks like he wants to fly away.

Try to call your bird down when his body language indicates he is ready to try to come down. Do not constantly call.

Try hiding from your bird on occasion. This will create a level of anxiety in your bird which may cause him to try to come to you once you reappear. Usually birds will scream and or start moving around a lot when they are ready to make an effort to return to you. If you notice this activity, come out from hiding.

If you hear your bird screaming while you are hiding, he may be ready to fly or is already in the air. Come out of hiding right away. Most parrots scream when they are flying in this type of situation.

Birds also often relieve themselves and also scream right before they fly. Be alert for this. You may need to see where your bird flies. Be ready to run if necessary.

Avoid having a crowd of people around the bird's favorite person. A scared bird may not want to fly into a crowd of strangers. Give the bird's favorite person lots of room.

The sun is setting and your bird is still out.

Parrots will usually fly again shortly before the sun starts to set. This is probably your last

opportunity to get your bird back before he will begin to roost for the night. Take advantage of it. You can try to get the bird “pumped” up by yelling and creating a level of excitement. This may encourage one last flight.

As the sun starts to set, your bird will start to fluff his feathers and get ready to roost for the night. At this point it is best to just allow him to go to sleep. Keep an eye on him until the sun has set completely. Remember his exact location.

Before the sun rises the next day, return to that location. Your bird should still be there, unless he was frightened in the night (owls can cause this).

Usually by 8:30 or 9:00 AM your bird will be ready to fly again or make an attempt to get to you. Repeat the steps described in the section “You have located your bird, but he is out of reach”.

Your bird has flown off and after 24 hours of searching he has not been spotted.

Contact the following people and let them know you are looking for your bird. If a person finds your bird they may contact one of these organizations.

Call animal control

Call the SPCA/humane society

Call local veterinarians

Call local zoos

Call local pet shops

Call local police

Place an ad in the classified section of the paper for a “lost” bird.

Note: Don’t give out the bird’s band number. If your bird accidentally falls into the wrong hands this could lead to removal of the band.

Check the classified section of the paper for “found” bird. Answer all ads. People are sometimes unaware of what they have found. A Congo African grey may be mistaken for the mythical red tailed pigeon by a helpful stranger who is unfamiliar with parrots.

Post flyers that state “lost bird” in the areas you last saw your bird. You may also wish to offer a reward as incentive for people to call.

Often times a bird is found within 24 hours of his disappearance. The trick is to find the person who found your bird before you.

Do not give up

The key to getting a bird back is perseverance. Do not accept that you will not get the bird back once you have lost sight of him or her. As a professional bird trainer that free flies many types of birds on a regular basis, I can attest that parrots are often the easiest type of bird to locate and recover. Trust me - nothing is more frustrating than searching for the silent, but observant owl who has buried himself in the bushes and has watched you walk by 100 times! Thankfully our parrots often seek out human or bird companionship if and when they have a big flight adventure.

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Barbara has been a professional in the field of animal training since 1990. She owns and operates a company, Good Bird, Inc., (HYPERLINK "<http://www.GoodBirdInc.com>" www.GoodBirdInc.com)) that provides behavior and training products to the companion parrot community. These products include Good Bird Magazine, books, videos, and training/behavior workshops. Barbara has provided behavior workshops and/or animal training presentations at the Association of Avian Veterinarians conference, The American Federation of Aviculture conference, The International Parrot Conference at Loro Parque, Parrot Festival, The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators conference, American Association of Zoo Keepers conference, Association of Zoos and Aquariums conference, The Parrot Society of Australia conference and many more. She is a past president of the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (www.IAATE.org) and served on the Board of Directors from 1997-2009. Her expertise has been utilized by the US Dept. of Agriculture, Fish and Wildlife Service and numerous international professional organizations.

She is the author of "Good Bird! A Guide to Solving Behavior Problems in Companion Parrots" by Avian Publications and also "The Parrot Problem Solver. Finding Solutions to Aggressive Behavior" by TFH Publications. She is also the producer of the Good Bird Parrot Behavior and Training DVD series.

Barbara's experience also includes consulting on animal training in zoos and other animal related facilities. She has been a part of the development and production of more than 15 different free flight education programs. Barbara continues to provide consulting services to zoos, nature centers and other animal facilities through her other company Animal Training and Consulting Services. In her career she has trained animals, trained staff, and/or presented shows at facilities around the world.