

Starting Flighted Recall

These 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 living with a flighted bird, and can also be expanded into a variety of games or tricks that 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 (yes, this happens more than you'd expect with clipped birds).

For a young, fledged bird, this can be trained somewhat quickly (4-8 weeks). For an older bird, one not used to flying, or who was never fledged as a baby, it can take several months to a year or more. You can also teach this with some modification to birds who are clipped (just work longer at the shorter distances).



Barb Saunders' Bare-Eyed Cockatoo rescue, Fred, learning to fly down.

The important thing is to make it fun along the way and go at the bird's own pace. In the end, you will have a bird who is more confident, more able to think through how to get back to you in case of an accident, and can respond to a "Come Here!" cue.

Before you start, familiarize yourself to basic training methods for birds from one of the Good Bird DVD's or books on clicker training for birds.

HOW TO START:

If your bird is clipped or not used to flying, start at step 1. If your bird will already fly a few feet or more, you can start with step 2.

For each session, work only as long as your bird remains interested. At first this may only be a few minutes, later perhaps 10-20 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 work there. Move further away gradually. If you are working steps 1-3 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.

1. Walking Recall

Start with your bird on a flat surface in an area with few distractions. Have the bird walk to you and step up onto your hand. Click and treat when the bird steps up onto you. Gradually increase the distance 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!") when you start getting the behavior. You may want to use the bird's name as well, as an attention-getter (i.e., "Sammy – come here!" = "Sammy [get ready] – come here!") This also helps if you have multiple birds.)

2. Strrrretching Recall

Next 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 do a long step to get there. When the bird steps onto your hand, click and treat. Repeat a few times, as long as the bird is interested. Try to stop before the bird gets bored.

Move your hand gradually further away from the perch so the bird has to stretch and eventually make little jumps to get to it. Click and treat.

If your bird was never fledged, this first jump may take some time, especially if he has had negative experiences trying to fly in the past. While working on the transition between stretching and jumping, keep the session positive by switching back and forth between stretching recalls and asking for a distance that will require a short jump, and always end with something the bird has done successfully. A lot of verbal encouragement at this point can also help a lot. The accompanying article by Mandy Andrea describes some techniques that can be used to help at this stage.

3. Jumping-Flapping Recall (1-2 feet)

When the bird is comfortably doing a certain distance, move your hand a little further 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, it's time to back up 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 rewarded each session, so he doesn't get discouraged (i.e., "set yourselves up for success"). The increases in distance we're talking here are in increments of INCHES, not feet.

4. Short Flight Recall (3-8 feet)

Gradually increase the distances your bird must jump so that the wings become more essential. For a medium sized bird, more than about 2 feet will require more than just jumping/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 6-10 inches at a time or so, then up to a foot at a time. But remember, we don't want to encourage latency, so if there is much reluctance to try a new distance, back up (that is, go CLOSER).

If there is hesitation beyond a certain distance, do increments that are almost imperceptible.

At this stage, if the bird was never fledged, 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.

5. Flying Up and Down

When your bird is able to do longer distances (6-8ft) start varying the height and direction. For example, ask the bird to fly UP to your hand, or DOWN to your hand, or off to the side. 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 work up gradually.

6. Longer Flight Recall

When the bird is flying the length of a room, start increasing the difficulty by asking it to turn around corners, go into different rooms, fly up/down stairs etc. Turning is also a learned skill, as is slowing down and landing. Again, every new level of difficulty should be done incrementally, and if the bird is refusing, back up to the last step for awhile. For example, when training to fly into another room, gradually back up until you are in the other room, and let the bird master each new distance along the way.

For turning 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 move back around the corner or into the doorway so that he has to start turning a little bit to get to your hand. With birds who are unfledged or not used to flying, the increments may have to be TINY, so they're almost not noticeable.

7. Big Indoors 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, intentionally (for outdoor training) or unintentionally (escape).

NEVER attempt outdoor sessions without contacting an experienced trainer personally FIRST for guidance and assessment of your bird's skill and level of training.

Other Tips

- ***Clicker Training***

Familiarize yourself with clicker training techniques! See the yahoo group "Bird-click" for lots and lots of good information. Teaching other simple tricks is also a great way to help your bird "learn to learn."

- ***For Unfledged or Non-flying Birds:***

If your bird has been clipped and/or was never fledged, these steps may take much longer than for a flighted/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 having the bird come to a sturdy perch right in front of you rather than to your hand.

With birds who have never fledged, or have just never flown much, CONFIDENCE is just as important as the actual flight skills. If there is much hesitation at any step (new distance, new height, etc) go back to where it's comfortable. It works well to do lots of recalls at a comfortable level, and include just a few pushing the limits.

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/keep that behavior well trained. Then do another later when you work some of the more difficult skills (but not so difficult that there is too much hesitation.)

- ***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.

Give dinner as the final training session reward, as soon as possible after finishing. (Preferably it is ready to go before you start. If you're training indoors, watching you get it ready can also be great incentive for your bird to get into the training mood!)