

RAPTOR REPORT

Blips and Bumps in Raptor Training: Managing in the Moment

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Photos courtesy of Cascades Raptor Center

For those of us who pride ourselves on the choice-based nature of the training we do, it never feels good when something doesn't go according to plan. Whether you call it a "withdrawal from the trust account," or something more colorful, the unexpected is unavoidable - and often uncomfortable. Despite careful antecedent arrangement, working with the right bird for the job, and all the practice in the world; blips happen! This is especially true for those of us who train in a location where we don't have complete control of the environment. Perhaps your training area is open to the public, maybe there is noisy vehicle traffic nearby, a neighbor is mowing the lawn, or construction is happening in the distance. Sometimes guests can get overly excited and behave in a way that makes our feathered partners uncomfortable. Even something as simple as a seasonal allergy can create an unexpected road bump. This article, in fact, was inspired by an ill-timed sneeze.

Dante, a male Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*), has been in human care since he was around six months old and he is now close to three years old. He has been trained with positive-reinforcement, empowered as much as possible, is



comfortable targeting around his mew, having his anklets manipulated for jessing and feet touched, sits comfortably and confidently on a trainer's glove or a perch while meeting guests around our site, and is learning to ride in a vehicle in a custom-crafted carrier (at his own pace). We've spent a great deal of time counter-conditioning for many of the things he sees on a daily basis, from hoses to over-exuberant children. We never considered that we should expose him to (a low intensity) sneeze or two before it happened. On a beautiful sunny day, while Dante was sitting out on a perch in an open space around 15'x 15', I interrupted what I was saying to a guest with a sneeze. Startled, Dante dove off of the perch away from me. I had

control of the leash, tethered to my gauntlet, and his flight was limited to around two feet before he landed on the mulched ground...a position he had never been in before.

So. What next?

It was an uncomfortable situation. Dante just experienced something he seldom has in his life - not having the option to do something he chooses to do. That loss of control doesn't feel good, but there was nothing to do except reset and move forward.

Assess the situation and identify your "Plan B" first!

Taking a moment, I realized Dante was not in any immediate danger. There were guests nearby, but not close enough to come into physical contact with the eagle. I had con-



Dante in his enclosure

trol of the leash and was crouched a few feet away just giving Dante time to relax, not asking for anything. He had some “good” choices he could make - move around in the open space, come back to the glove, or go back to the perch nearby. The worst-case scenario would be if he felt overwhelmed and tried to fly farther away, or for some reason chose to move towards guests. I knew that I was capable of turning his movements into a “bait correction” on the glove by being quick to manipulate the leash and jesses. Not the option I wanted to have happen, but this is something he had inevitably practiced in the past and was fully capable of doing. So, my WORST case scenario was something he (and I) could handle, but was also something that I hoped to avoid. Feeling better about the situation, and seeing he was showing signs that he was comfortable and curious about the sticks near his feet, I felt obligated to say something to the visitors watching in silence (and taking pictures.)

Address the bystanders!

We’re in the business of education, which inevitably means everything we touch plays a part in forming opinions and shaping attitudes towards our work. The things we say, how we work with the birds in our care, the state of repair of our aviaries, or how clean; they all play into the public’s perception. In a situation where something’s going “not quite right,” the best and easiest thing to do is **be honest**.

That’s right! The beauty of having a training philosophy that puts the **raptor first** is that there is no shame in explaining exactly what’s going on when something goes wrong. In fact, it’s potentially an opportunity to demon-

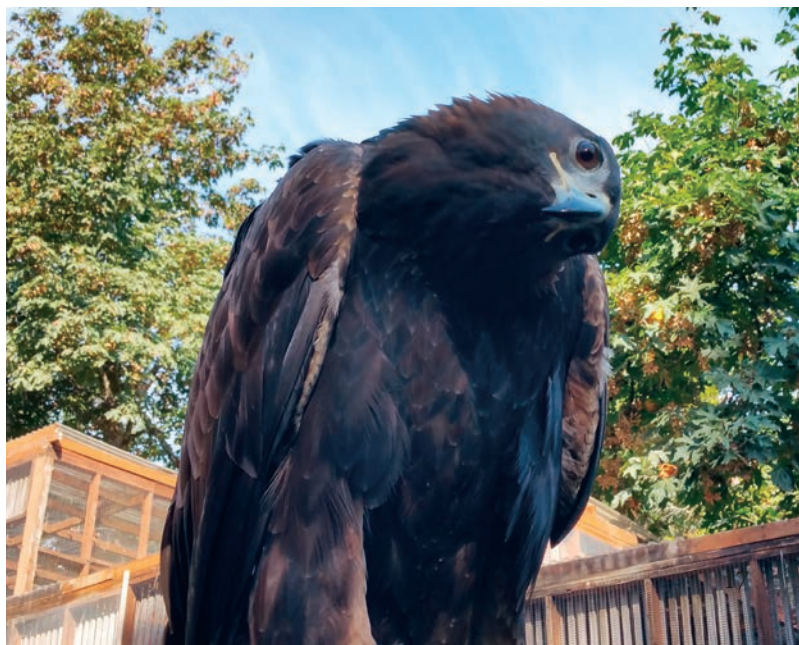


Dante and the author inspiring a crowd of visitors at Cascades Raptor Center.

strate just how powerful choice-based training can be. I explained (with a slightly forced smile) that Dante was startled by my unexpected sneeze and moved away from the sound reflexively - and now is exploring the bark mulch. I let the observers know that what happened next would be entirely up to Dante, and that he had a few choices he could make that I’d reward heavily with some tasty rabbit (I was equipped with two rabbit leg “jackpots” and many bits of meat and organ). Having framed what would happen next in the minds of the visitors as something **positive**, I shifted my attention back to Dante and the aforementioned choices.

Pressing the Reset Button

As mentioned before, Dante had a few options to get back to some sort of familiar territory. In a situation like this, the key is to be flexible. Be ready to ask for an alternative behavior if the first behavior you request is too difficult. Be prepared to relax your criteria for reinforc-





ing a given behavior to build some momentum. Or, change your reinforcement strategy, even falling back to using a luring strategy, where you present the food first to elicit the behavior.

I started with what I thought would be the easiest option first - asking Dante to step up to the glove from the ground. He let me move close to him without moving away, and I made sure to **reinforce the “next best thing,”** which in this case was simply not moving away from me. He took a piece of rabbit from my fingers. Ok.

I offered him the glove, he looked at it, then turned and hop-walked a few feet away. I kept a loose leash as much as possible while at the same time trying not to loom or get in his space. If he had moved too close to the guests, I could have stopped following briefly and he would have experienced a taut leash when trying to move in that direction. He took some more bits of rabbit from my fingers as I got back into position for a step up, ready to reward him with a rabbit leg to work on in the glove. Then, I remembered, I had never actually asked him to step up directly from the ground before. Ever.

Just to be sure, I tried to lure him into a step up by presenting the rabbit jackpot. He beaked at it and gave a tug but didn't offer a step up. He wasn't particularly interested in the food, as we have a tendency to man-

age motivation with our raptor diets in a way that leads to under-eager as opposed to overeager behaviors. Knowing this wasn't going to be an easy behavior as we had not practiced it, I changed my approach. I offered the glove higher, so he could hop up. I offered the glove lower, so he could take a tiny baby step forward instead of up. I offered organ meat as a lure, trying to elicit the behavior (not dragging the reinforcer, but certainly making it necessary to step towards me to take it). Fail, fail, fail.

Since plan A, which was of getting him to come back to the glove didn't work, I moved on to plan A-2: getting him to choose to go back to the perch. I cued, an obvious pointing gesture with my finger placed on the green AstroTurf T-perch standing about three feet high which he is very familiar with perching on. Dante watched, then played with a stick near his foot. I cued again, then placed a small rabbit leg on the perch. Dante looked a bit closer...seeing my opportunity I upped the ante and switched the small rabbit leg for a larger rabbit hindquarter. Seeing that, Dante chose to jump/fly back up to the perch, grabbing the rabbit and settling in while I addressed the crowd. We were back to “normal!”

Later on, over a cold La Croix: Break it down!

Dante's session ended with the familiar routine of a comfortable walk to his aviary on the glove. A short time later, our team treated ourselves to ice cold La Croix, (don't forget to reward yourself for doing this sort of thing), and we reflected on what happened. I was taught to think about what worked, what didn't work, and what could have been done differently to prevent the “blip” in the first place. I was able to keep Dante comfortable after the initial startle from the sneeze, I managed the public perception of the event, was able to elicit a choice from Dante to perform a desired behavior using positive reinforcement (albeit I had to fall back to using a lure instead of a simple cue).

If I had to identify something that didn't work (well), I would say if I had a longer leash available, I would have been able to position my body and glove in a way that could have helped Dante sharing his personal space with me easier. I also could have asked for a real jump to the glove from the ground, which I wasn't able to do with the length of leash I had.

In terms of what could be done to prevent this sort of

thing in the future, from a training perspective, two things come to mind. We could have exposed him to sniffs, snuffles and snorts of gradually increasing volume before being nearly blown from the perch by the explosive force of my allergy-induced sneeze. Or, moving a bit farther down the timeline of the event, if I had practiced any "stepping to the glove from the ground," behavior, "resetting" could have been accomplished in a more timely fashion and without the need to use a VERY generous lure.

I'll end this discussion of our "bump in the road" by mentioning it's important to note that Dante got to enjoy the entire rabbit hindquarter I put on the perch as a lure - it was a difficult behavior and deserved a high value reinforcer, increasing the likelihood of a quick recall if it ever happens again. Most importantly, it was the honest thing to do!

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