

# RAPTOR REPORT

## Meeting the Challenge of Transitioning Raptors from Force to Choice

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The desire to employ the least aversive, most positive methods for working with raptors is increasing in our field, and many trainers are uncertain about where to begin transitioning the work they do with their collection. By providing raptors with more choice in their interactions with their trainers, the birds' quality of life can improve both physically and psychologically.

**“But this is how we have always done it, and it works!”**

This statement is overheard in many professions and animal training is no exception. As professionals and humans concerned about animal welfare, we should always be seeking to improve how we accomplish our tasks. The science of animal care and training has progressed significantly in recent decades, and many facilities have adopted new best practices that emphasize a focus on the psychology of the animals in their care. Their experiences support the idea that if you rely on trust-based training relationships and give animals the opportunity to make choices with favorable outcomes, those animals show an increased willingness to interact and learn as time goes on.

### What does no choice look like?

While the methods listed below may be effective for presenting a bird to an audience on a glove, all of these strategies employ either negative reinforcement or remove control from the raptor, which can lead to learned helplessness.

- Grabbing jesses and pulling up or out.
- Pulling on a leash attached to jesses.
- Bumping legs or chest to elicit a step up to the fist.
- Bumping legs against a perch to elicit stepping off the glove.
- Inability to escape the interaction (e.g., catching nets, low perches, chasing).
- Moving into the bird's personal space while they are attempting to avoid and escape trainer.
- “Waiting out” bates.
- Picking up toes to elicit a step up.



*Above: Bumping glove into belly to initiate a step up to the glove. (no owls were harmed in the process of taking this picture).*

*Below: Bumping back of legs into the perch to initiate a step off (again no owls were harmed in the taking of this picture).*







*Above: Trainer's glove up and away from bird. Finger tap on the glove is the cue. Eurasian Eagle-owl (*Bubo bubo*).*

*Below: Easy access ramps for non-flighted bird to self-load into crate. Finger point by the door is the cue to walk into the crate and get up on the perch. Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*).*



## What does choice look like?

We measure choice by observing the raptors' body language as we approach them and their willingness to move towards the trainer when behaviors are cued. For each behavior that is requested; we provide positive reinforcement in the form of the bird's favorite treats. An easy way to provide a raptor the choice to not engage is by providing a high perch outside of the trainers' reach that the bird can easily access.

The behaviors we look for include:

- Coming down (either walking ramps or flying) from a high perch to interact with trainers – indicating a willingness to share their personal space with trainers.
- Coming to perch, glove, scale on cue with short hop or flight (i.e., no physical contact made with the bird).
- Remaining on glove while safety equipment is attached (jesses threaded, swivels applied, etc.).
- Forward movement onto a perch or into a crate.
- Waiting on a starting or "station location" in aviary before you



*Eagle-owl front presentation from glove into the crate. The choice is given for him to hop from glove onto the perch.*

enter their space.

- Jesses used as safety equipment with care taken to apply NO pressure to legs, they are just there in case of an emergency.

## How does one begin the transition process?

While never easy, once the decision is made to employ this method of training, you need to go all in! Imagine from the animal's perspective if one day they are given the choice to interact but then the next they are grabbed and forced to sit on the glove in front of a crowd of strangers. What are they to expect the next day? How have you built any trust with that animal? You cannot expect to continue working with the bird in the way that you had before while also transitioning them to a choice-based training technique.

In order to begin this process, you need to commit to proceeding at the animal's pace. Never force them into situations they are not prepared for, and consider that not every individual will be capable of trusting you enough to do the job that you used to make them do. This can be difficult if your facility requires programming continues as usual without interruption during this transition. If that is the case, you may want to begin this process with only one or two individuals that you deem to be your best candidates, as difficult as it may be to continue using aversive methods with other individuals.

## How to pick candidates?

Some birds within your collection may be able, willing, and enthusiastic participants - while others may not choose to interact with you at all. Your first step is assessment: which bird is the right bird for the job?

Some characteristics that may indicate good candidates:

- Remains calm sharing space during routine husbandry.
- Interacts with enrichment items.
- Eats in your presence.
- Physically capable of moving away to another part of the aviary if they choose (i.e., if disabled, the aviary is perched for ease of



Western Screech Owl (*Megascops kennicottii*) enjoying some R+

movement).

- Less history with aversive/coercive techniques.

## Learning to listen to the birds.

As important as having the right bird for the job, you also need the best trainer for the job. Those individuals need to be sensitive to bird body language - especially those behaviors that precede escape and avoidance behaviors. They will need to understand the basic tenets of positive reinforcement training and have the patience to work at the bird's pace to build trust. Their availability to visit the bird several times a day, most days during the week for what might be several weeks or months, is critical. This individual trainer should be responsible for husbandry; remembering that every interaction this raptor has with a person is a learning opportunity. And, one must always keep in mind that if this person routinely grabbed the bird to present it in programming, there is history of force that will need to be overcome.

## Where to start.

The first step should be a complete physical exam of the bird. During this exam, body condition should be noted (i.e., keel score, check for fat pads). Many free-fed raptors are often obese which can have serious negative health consequences and lowers the trainer's ability to provide something of value (food reinforcer) to the individual. During this exam, any routine coping should be done (as you will not want to physically restrain this bird during your transition process). Finally, consider removing jesses and either not applying any equipment or apply properly fitted grommated anklets. There are two reasons for this recommendation. First, any equipment on a raptor's legs can potentially cause life

threatening injury. If that equipment cannot be examined closely on a near daily basis because the bird does not choose to share personal space with you, there is a risk that it could cause a problem without you being aware of it. Secondly, by removing the jesses, you remove the possibility of slipping back into old habits like using the equipment to control the bird.

The second step after performing a physical exam is preparing housing. The aviary in which the individual is housed should be assessed for safety, comfort, and mobility. Designing the space so individuals can move to high perches out of the reach of the trainers, or down to lower spaces to interact with trainers and receive reinforcers, will give the raptor more choice and control. Consider future training and add a platform where a scale may be placed or where the bird can stand and eat comfortably near the trainer. Ensure the perching options provide both cover from the elements and the opportunity to sit in the sun and rain. If these changes are made before you begin the transition process, adjusting perching later will not slow you down as you move forward.

## Case study

While each individual bird is unique, and behavior is a "study of one," a case study may help illustrate the first days of a transition to choice-based training.

Our facility received a Burrowing Owl (*Athene cunicularia*) from another facility that was closing. We had very little information on this bird other than he had been very young when he came into care, was housed in a small indoor space, was tethered, and had been used for programs by a handler who ran their hand up the leash to force step-ups to the glove.

Day One: We removed the jesses (applied grommated anklets), did a physical exam, coped his beak and talons, and moved him into an appropriately perched (including a burrow to hide from us) aviary. Once he had settled, trainers visited him several times that day. Each time we visited, he offered body language that we interpreted as precursors to escape/avoidance behaviors. We would move away, leaving some food when he calmed, and exit his space.

Day Two: Entered aviary multiple times, bird perched up high and no precursors to escape/avoidance seen, trainers left tidbits each time.

Day Three & Four: Same as day two.

Day Five: Began eating in our presence. We continued watching body language and, if no precursors to escape/avoidance behaviors were offered, more tidbits were placed closer and closer to the owl.

Day Six: Same as day five with the addition of the bird moving and approaching when trainers offered bits from their fingers. Occasionally he would move away, but trainers never followed. We allowed him to choose more space. If the owl stayed near us, we continued to offer bits. Several similar visits throughout the day.

Day Seven: Approaching trainers when we entered. Trainers presented





*Above: Case study - Ra the Burrowing owl. Asking for a step up.*

*Below: What if TWO people ask for a step up? He did not want to step up right away so I came in and asked too! There was a wild owl in the area..*



glove to owl at a distance and used a piece of mouse as a lure followed by finger point to glove. Owl approached glove and put feet on glove, received reinforcement. If owl stayed on glove, more bits. If the owl left glove, pointed to glove again and got more bits for staying on glove. Several visits. During these first offerings of a new behavior, a very high rate of reinforcement was maintained to increase the likelihood that the behaviors would be repeated in the future.

Day Eight: Introduced the perch scale. Placed a bit on the scale, owl came to scale, stayed on scale and trainers handed more bits. Pointed to glove (no lure) and came to glove. Several similar visits.

Day Nine: Targets on cue to scale, glove, and perch with no lure. Sharing personal space with trainers while sitting on the glove and bits given for staying near trainer. Started counterconditioning manipulation of anklets and the threading of jesses through grommets. Increasing duration sitting on the glove.

Within just a few more days, this owl had selected a station he would perch upon when he saw trainers approach his aviary. He was also moving through transitional spaces such as doors on the glove and spending time out of his aviary, all while receiving reinforcers. It is important to note that for every cued behavior a reinforcement is given to the bird on a 1:1 continuous reinforcement schedule.

This case study highlights an extremely successful example of transitioning from force to choice. The trainers involved in this process had experience in such training, the owl was in a completely new environment and was able to quickly build trust with trainers. Not every transition can be expected to move that quickly nor be as successful; patience will be required.

During this same assessment period, another small owl had arrived from the same facility. However, this bird never trusted us enough to even eat in our presence. Whenever he saw a trainer, he would clack his beak, go into concealment posture, and present behaviors indicative of escape and avoidance. We experienced two very different outcomes based on these individual birds' abilities to build a trusting relationship.

The transition to choice-based training requires a facility-wide commitment and the benefits to the physical and psychological welfare of the birds in your care are innumerable. Visits to facilities that use choice-based training methods can be beneficial and IAATE members may request a mentor from the Professional Development Committee to assist them in the process of moving away from force towards choice. Attending IAATE conferences is another great way to meet people who can share their experiences and guide you on your way to best practices.

While this process may seem daunting and unachievable, there are many success stories of facilities who have fully made this transition with their collection. May their achievements inspire you as well!

#### **Additional Resources:**

On the Fly: The Process of Redesigning an Established Raptor Program Jason Beale, CPBT-KA & Abby Flanders Shaver's Creek Environmental Center, Penn State University IAATE Conference Proceedings Orlando FL 2019

Shifting Paradigms; How to Begin Establishing Choice for Avian Ambassadors Leia Minch, CPBT-KA, American Bald Eagle Foundation. IAATE Conference Proceeding Atlanta GA 2017

*All Photos Courtesy of Cascades Raptor Center.*