

Step-By-Step Bird Target Training

Train your bird to target fly to a perch, arm – or anything.

By Ramona Delgado

Flight requires a great deal of muscle, energy and power. A bird that spends most of its time in a cage or on a perch is in no condition to begin the strenuous exercise required by flight. For the majority of pet birds that have had their wing feathers trimmed, the first step of flight training requires conditioning the bird to encourage short flights and activity rather than training toward a specific flight behavior.

Courtesy Cheryl Hoffmann, Ohio

Before you begin flight target training, work with your bird to prepare it for the upcoming flight behaviors.

Coaching Your Bird

How do you begin to condition your perch potato? Start with flapping behaviors, which will turn into flight behaviors. Always operate at the bird's comfort level. Your task as coach is to persuade the bird that it really does want to fly. Never drop the bird, push the bird beyond its comfort level, or do anything that will discourage or hurt the bird.

If you move too fast and ask your bird to do something beyond its mental and physical capabilities, you are going to diminish the bird's enthusiasm for this team activity as well as risk injury to the bird. You simply cannot make a flighted bird do anything it does not want to do. Once you start working with flighted birds, you need to become versed in the art of persuasion – or to put it in more exact terms, you need to become an expert at reinforcing the behaviors that you want from the bird.

Get Started

First, choose a perch that is familiar and safe to the bird. Make sure the perch is in a place where the bird feels secure and to which it is highly motivated to fly. This can be a favorite person or a secure playstand. My African grey parrot's first "fly-to perch" was the top of her cage – a good choice because it did not wobble when she landed, she was comfortable climbing and flying on it, and she was very motivated to fly toward her food dishes.

Second, start out with short hops to the chosen target perch. Practice this once or twice a day. Three important considerations are really key to success:

1. Choose a time of day to train when the bird is highly motivated to fly to the target perch. This is almost always right before feeding time. If you have trouble getting the bird to hop to the target perch, step back and ask yourself, "Why would the bird want to fly to this perch?" If there isn't a good reason, create one. The best reason in the bird's estimation usually is food, but other things work, such as praise, security, a favorite bird or person, or even the opportunity to see its surroundings.
2. Be persistent. At this stage of the game you are just trying to improve the bird's confidence and its physical ability to fly. Like every physical activity, the key is practice, practice, practice.
3. Work at the bird's pace. Gently coax and encourage it to fly. Some birds might not need to go through this exercise, but for other birds, this stage takes a long time. The slower birds, like good wine, often get better as they age.

As the bird becomes more fluent and confident with the hops, gradually increase the distance. Watch the bird's body language and work at the bird's comfort level. If it is comfortable with a 6-inch hop, gradually increase this to a foot-long hop.

Pay attention to what your bird communicates to you about its enthusiasm for this endeavor. One important clue is the bird's grip on your arm. A loose grip and a hop initiated by the bird might mean you are both ready to go on to the next step. A bird that clings to you and is unwilling to hop probably means that you need to take a step back, shorten the distance, and check your reinforcers, the time of day and/or perch choice, and/or go back to working with flapping exercises.

Once your bird initiates the hops, turn this into a cued behavior. The first time the bird hops to the perch, praise it and offer a treat. It doesn't take long for the bird to figure out that it is going to get rewarded for these little exercises. When that happens, you can decide on a cue and start training the cue.

If my target perch is the cage, I point to the cage and say, "Fly to your cage." I do believe that birds are visual creatures and respond best to visual cues, but I also like to add the verbal cue. As the bird becomes more accustomed to this exercise, offer a reward only when it flies to the cage on your cue.