

Parrots And Harnesses

A reader shares her experiences with bird harnesses

By Susan Chamberlain

Use a harness and leash combination to keep your bird safe when outdoors.
Courtesy Kim Rengh, Ohio

Many years ago, it was common to see a parrot or macaw manacled to its perch. A metal ring around the bird's leg was attached to a chain fastened to a perch. Although a few companies still market leg chains for birds, these have not been popular for many years. Intended to keep birds from flying away, these leg irons resulted in broken legs and other injuries if birds fell from the perch. Now people use harnesses to keep their birds tethered — and only while outside their homes and only around the body — not a leg.

Harnesses would have been unthinkable when most pet birds were wild-caught imports. But according to BIRD TALK reader Betty Roth, today's domestic, hand-raised birds are good candidates for wearing harnesses. In most cases, younger birds adapt more easily than mature ones. Two of Roth's birds, Gumby, a Senegal parrot, and Penny Banana, a parvipes yellow-naped Amazon, successfully wear harnesses. Betty uses the style that resembles a figure eight when it's on the bird. "You don't see it that way when it's on the bird," explained Roth. "You put the loop over the head, then the part that comes down from the loop goes under the wings and across the back and fastens in front of the bird. There's another harness that consists of separate loops that fasten across the bird's body. Both are good."

I asked Roth to describe her experiences in getting the birds to adapt to their harnesses. "Gumby was young, but not a baby; she has always been handled on every part of her body. It's much easier to train a bird to wear a leash when the bird is accustomed to being handled. I had Gumby since she was 8 weeks old, so there's a trust there to begin with. She's been exposed to many different situations and goes out with me frequently. I wanted her to be part of things in a safe way.

"Initially, I stood her on the table and eased the loop over her head while praising her; gradually pulling the strap until it was the right size. I manipulated her wings and fastened it, but I didn't put the leash onto the harness at first. I wanted the bird to get used to it without feeling threatened. Gumby was comfortable with the harness after several practice sessions.

"When I eventually attached the leash, I brought her outside right away. Going outdoors is a favorite treat, so she associated the leash with good things. She nibbles on the leash, but so far hasn't chewed through. When we're outdoors or at an indoor pet expo where crowds are present, she must wear the leash and harness."

Roth's yellow nape, Penny, was somewhat more resistant. She didn't bite, but she'd run away or try to back out of the loop. Penny was much older than Gumby when Roth began conditioning her to wear a harness. "We went very slowly. We had many practice sessions. Of course Penny is a nape that doesn't bite ... you wouldn't want to attempt putting a harness on a yellow nape in full display! It took about a month of short practice sessions until Penny wore the harness comfortably." Betty warns bird owners to supervise larger birds closely. Their beaks are stronger, and they may chew through the leash.