

## To Jess or Not To Jess, That is the Question

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The number of raptors used in educational programs increases each year as zoological facilities explore new ways to educate and inspire their visitors. Many facilities have realized the value of using positive reinforcement instead of force and coercion that once dominated animal management and training strategies in zoos. As raptor-training methods evolve toward more gentle and empowering approaches, astute trainers discuss how to reduce aversive stimuli, which often leads to discussions about the use of the jesses on raptors. Managing program birds on jesses is a complicated issue with many perspectives worth evaluating. The perspective I represent is that jesses are a safety measure, not a training tool.

The most important factor in determining whether or not to use jesses on birds of prey is the safety of the animal collection and the people working around the raptors. There is no question that some raptors can perform in programs and be managed in facilities without jesses. However, there are many raptors that need to wear jesses to insure the health, welfare and safety of the birds, trainers and visitors to our facilities.

### Facilities

Housing raptors free of jess restraints in wire mesh cages is certainly possible for some raptors, but not all. Mainly because of their association with trainers (either positive or negative), birds trained to participate in programs are more likely to hang on the wire mesh than birds housed in exhibits. Birds that want to be with their trainers hang on the wire when they see the trainer approaching or sometimes even when they see the trainer in the distance. Birds that have an aversive history with trainers often hang on the wire trying to get away from trainers as they approach or enter the facility. Hanging on the wire often leads to broken feathers, and injured feet, wings, beaks and ceres. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service's falconry regulations prohibit raptors from coming in contact with wire mesh and require that free-lofted raptors are housed in mews (facilities with vertical bars on the windows) instead of wire mesh cages.

Housing raptors in mews is safer for the birds because they cannot hang on the bars. However, there are still problems associated with free-lofting raptors instead of tethering them in their facilities. Some birds get more aggressive, nervous or difficult to handle when housed free in mews. I have seen perfectly tame and gentle birds become aggressive and unmanageable after just a couple days in a mew. I have also seen calm birds become nervous and fly away at a trainers approach when moved into a free-lofted situation in a mew. Each animal

is different, and all housing and management plans should be designed for the welfare of each individual animal.

### Training

Training raptors without jesses is not new, people have done it for hundreds of years. But, the use of jesses has evolved for good reasons: the health, welfare and safety of the birds, trainers and audience members, not to enable force-based training. Of course some birds can be worked without jesses, just like some horses can be ridden without reins and some dogs can be walked along busy streets without a leash. But, to do it safely requires the right animal and experience that comes from working with a large number of animals and situations.

My professional experience training raptors spans well over 30 years and possibly more than 1,000 raptors. I have worked many raptors without jesses and housed countless raptors in mews without tethering them to perches. However, all of the raptors in our current shows wear jesses because we often carry these birds past other birds in the backstage areas. This is generally the only time we hold a raptor's jesses. We never hold a raptor's jesses while it is performing in the show because we rely on our positive reinforcement training to establish and maintain all of the behaviors in the show. If we want a bird to sit on our hand for a period of time, we train that behavior with positive reinforcement instead of using the jesses to punish the behavior of flying off the hand by holding the jesses.

Holding a hawk's jesses in our back area is a safety protocol and not a training strategy. If a hawk bates (tries to fly off our hand) as we walk the bird past other birds in the back area, we implement a reinforcement training plan to teach the behavior of sitting on the hand as we walk the bird in the back area. We believe repeated bating is a symptom of poor training and we never view bating as acceptable.

### Right tool for the job

Another important factor that deserves attention is the use of imprinted raptors in programs. My experience has shown me there is significant potential for aggression from hand-raised (imprinted) raptors that are flown free in public programs. I have seen and heard of many cases of imprinted raptors injuring trainers and even members of the audience. The risk is high enough that over 10 years ago I developed a policy in my company to avoid using imprinted raptors, except owls, in our free-flight programs. However, I know many people use imprinted raptors in programs. Therefore, I strongly recommend imprinted raptors wear jesses when they are being handled by trainers, especially near the public. We are talking about risk management and safety behavior here. It is about making a decision based on the probability of events occurring. The probability of injury with an un-jessed, imprinted raptor is too great to take the chance.

Staffing is another important issue that helps people determine whether or not to

use jesses on raptors. Training free-flight raptors is one of the most difficult forms of training at a zoological institution. To do it properly and safely a person needs skills and sensitivities that usually take years to develop under the best guidance. The zoo community abounds with well-meaning novices handling birds of prey. In these cases, I also suggest the use of jesses on raptors. I believe working raptors without jesses should be limited to seasoned experts.

There is much discussion these days about what species of birds should wear jesses. The International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (IAATE) has published a position statement (<http://iaate.org/position-statements>) which clearly describes the use of jesses on raptors and non-raptors. This statement strongly suggests raptors are the only species of birds that should wear jesses. For the welfare and safety of the birds, non-raptors should not wear jesses.

### Conclusion

For over 30 years I have advocated positive reinforcement over force and coercion with animals in the zoo community. I have campaigned to give animals a voice through their behavior and encouraged people to develop partnerships with animals instead of forcing their dominion over them. My unwavering commitment to positive training strategies may seem inconsistent with the use of jesses on raptors in my care. It is certainly something I have thought about many times in my career. However, each time I evaluate the use of jesses on our raptors I conclude that jesses are a safe and humane way to manage most raptors. Certainly some raptors do best when free-lofted in a mew, and that is where we house those particular birds.

In this highly specialized field with limited experts and limitless opinions, new ideas and strategies will continue to evolve the way we train and manage our animals. The use of jesses on raptors will continue to be a topic of discussion, which is a welcome indication that our profession continues to grow. This growth is dependent on our animals' health and welfare, plus the safety of the people around them. As we pursue these goals we should never forget that jesses are a safety measure and not a training tool to punish unwanted behavior.