All Birds Secure: The Anatomy of a Flyoff

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For those who choose to fly their birds free, the occasional flyoff is an unwanted but unavoidable inevitability. Providing an animal with near-complete environmental freedom will always involve a level of inherent risk that we can't fully eliminate, regardless of the precautions we take or their previous behavioral predictability. If we as trainers collectively accept that risk, then how do we mitigate it? How do we lessen the potential dangers? How do we get better at the skills we need for recovery?

When things go wrong, what *really* matters in the moment?

During a flyoff, our prompt response and preparation may be the difference between a thirty-minute jaunt or a three-week nightmare, but with so many variables it can be a challenge to set ourselves and our animals up for success. And when it's all over, what then? Flyoffs are emotional, complex, stressful, and (for better *and* worse) subject to ever-increasing levels of public scrutiny. Our skill as trainers in navigating these emergencies and analyzing the information learned in the aftermath is crucial in ensuring our birds stay safe, stay healthy, and stay flying.

A personal view:

I began writing this paper in Arizona after a stressful three-day scramble through the pine forests outside of Flagstaff resulted in the safe recapture of an escaped red-tailed hawk who had been accidentally let out of a mew with no secondary containment. I finished writing it sitting in my car, watching and listening at a tree-line in Florida for the grating call of a wayward young green-winged macaw. Neither of these experiences were particularly enjoyable. But neither, have I come to realize, were they situations to be embarrassed about, hide, or to be concerned about being stigmatized by peers. For those of us who choose to free fly our birds, flyoffs are a part of life. Expert training will reduce their frequency… but the big wide world can be unpredictable, and our animals have the agency to act on their own, particularly when they're managed without using excessive hunger as a motivator.

So: *Flyoffs happen*.

The act of accepting that fact doesn't alleviate us of responsibility. As trainers and responsible caretakers, we have a duty of care to make flyoffs less frequent and less dangerous, to resolve them quickly, and—of increasing importance—to reduce stress for our staff and simultaneously engage our helpful surrounding communities in the process. If we are committed to doing better for ourselves and our animals, and to helping our industry and our community grow,

then sharing what we learn from our most uncomfortable moments is also our biggest key to moving forward.

One of the first and most important things I learned from Steve Martin, even before I was fortunate enough to work for Natural Encounters, Inc., was that '*mistakes are an opportunity to start again with more information'*, and for most of my career that's exactly how I viewed flyoffs: as mistakes that I could have (and should have) prevented. After all, if I was taking responsibility for my animal like I was supposed to, then every flyoff seemed like my own personal failure at a task I needed to do better at in the future. It took an embarrassingly long time for me to realize that flyoffs often aren't 'mistakes' at all… at least, any more than a child riding a wobbly bicycle faster than mom and dad intend is a 'mistake'. There's risk involved, and the result may ultimately be painful, but that doesn't mean we never let the child learn to ride the bike. In many cases, what we call a 'flyoff' is just another stage of human and animal learning. Granted, that stage of learning can be frightening for a caretaker to be a part of, but by analyzing and perfecting our responses to those frightening moments we can get better at keeping our birds safe while still giving them the freedom to make choices.

By the numbers…

So how many of these 'frightening moments' do we have? At Natural Encounters, Inc., we free-fly a *lot* of birds. When we recently put the numbers together, we have on average flown individual birds approximately 4.4 *million* times over the course of the company's history. At two of our major shows alone, birds make almost 175 000 flights a year—about 440 individual flights per day, and that doesn't count work at our Ranch facility or on other projects throughout the year.

For perspective, in the 2016/2017 season of training macaws (of approximately twelve thousand individual flights total), we had 19 total flyoffs occur—or roughly 0.2% of the total flights. More than half of those 19 flyoffs were successfully resolved in less than one day, either by the bird returning home on their own or by being called to the hand and secured offsite. The longest flyoff lasted four days, and the bird flew home on his own—the best possible resolution, despite that particular flyoff finding its way forever into my mental list of '*top ten not-fun work experiences to never repeat, ever*'.

The actual number of flyoffs which occur in our daily lives is always a tiny, tiny fraction of total flights, but that does not mean we don't take every single one of them seriously. We are committed as a team to learning all we can from each incident, so that we can reduce or mitigate risk in the future.

So what *is* a 'flyoff?'

What we label a flyoff can be subjective, but for the purposes of this paper a flyoff is a loss of human 'control' over a free-flighted bird. The severity of that loss of control will depend on the bird and the situation. For one facility, it may become a flyoff when the trainer has lost line of sight of the bird but can still hear it. For another, a bird may be sitting in a nearby tree but not responding to trainer cues for a particular amount of time. For others, it becomes a flyoff when the bird has left the property. For another, a flamingo 'walk-off' might be just as severe.

What may be considered a serious and harrowing flyoff for one bird, person, or facility may only be a minor inconvenience for another. That said, no matter how you define it, anyone working with flighted birds should know what a flyoff looks like *as far as you and your facility are concerned* and should be fully prepared for it to occur before ever flying their birds outside.

How do we prepare for a flyoff?

Preparing for a flyoff depends on the species you're flying and the environment you're flying them in, but the basics are the same: *Be the expert when it comes to your equipment, your environment, and your animal*. Equipment may seem straightforward, but if you are using radio-frequency telemetry as a safety tool, be certain you know how to use it, be certain it works, and be certain it's actually turned on and attached to your bird. I have absolutely been the person who accidentally flew a bird with a transmitter that wasn't turned on, and those are errors to talk about and share with your team so that someone else can learn from your error without making it, whether or not a flyoff actually occurred. Human mistakes happen, but try not to let them happen more than once. I have also been a part of flyoffs that involved transmitters with dead or dying batteries, or damaged antennas, and certainly have been involved in situations where staff did not have the practice needed to use receivers as well as we might have preferred. Many people don't appreciate how difficult it can be to use telemetry to find a moving target until their bird is heading for the next county. Trust me: it's much easier to learn that appreciation outside of an emergency situation.

To be clear: if you are using telemetry as a safety tool, it is very much worth the time you put into learning to use it at the highest level possible. Drills—sometimes creative ones—are part of what we use at NEI to help staff practice in non-critical situations, and whenever possible we try to make it fun. Sometimes, food reinforcers for the humans are on the line! Race to your 'bird'. Make it a game. Begin with static, planted transmitters, but if you have access to a drone or a dog or a golf-cart or an energetic child, don't underestimate the value of practicing with a moving target until everyone has at least a basic level of skill and comfort with the equipment.

Telemetry might seem the only tool you need, but if you've ever nearly run out of gas on a flyoff (I have), you start to ask even more questions: do you have vehicles prepared, and are they fully charged/filled with gas? Are there accessible crates nearby? Do you have enough binoculars on hand? At NEI, each of our vehicles is fitted with a 'flyoff kit' that contains a map of the area, bug spray, sunscreen, a pair of binoculars, and often a small container of a common reinforcer for a non-meat-eating species. Before all staff scramble when a bird goes up, making

sure someone stays behind to organize other needed items (frozen rodents, a lure, etc) is also beneficial and will save time later.

Now you're out and searching…. but do you and your staff know the environment immediately surrounding the area in which you're flying, and how to communicate those locations and directions effectively? What is to the north, south, east, and west? Can your staff identify where they are, where they're going, and accurately describe local landmarks? Personally, I am 'spatially challenged' at a level that makes immediate and accurate calls during flyoff situations difficult, so I spend extra time practicing orienting myself and labeling the directions clearly in my mind when I think a flyoff might be a possibility. Practice in advance helps when the situation becomes heated.

Do your staff have phone-chargers they keep with them? One of our most useful NEI holiday gifts for 2021 was a small 'fuel-rod' style phone charger, which is convenient and easy to keep on you when you find yourself unexpectedly bushwhacking for 14 hours and your phone becomes an important lifeline.

These may all seem simple things—and they are. But we often neglect the simple things, and that neglect hurts us when time is of the essence. The more prepared you are for a flyoff, and the more confident you are in your ability to competently respond to the situation, the less likely you'll be to allow fear or frustration to govern your decisions. I do not personally believe that the anxiety will ever (or should ever) truly leave you entirely (after all, that's *your bird* out there!), but having more tools at your disposal may allow you to let behavior be your guide rather than set you into a mode of trying desperately to control the behavior itself.

Public or private?

Some flyoffs are resolved quickly and cleanly. Some are messy, awful slogs of sleepless nights and stressful days. And sometimes, it gets too big for you to handle without outside help. It is easy to assume that the general public is more of a hinderance than a help, but time and time again we find that when the flyoff gets to the point where we are almost at a loss, a neighborhood grandma (who sits on her back porch during every waking hour) is the hero who phones us up to tell us that our bird is in her yard.

Craigslist, local pet networks, and local community groups (including hot-spots like vet clinics, animal control, etc.) are worth checking and posting on, and may contain both excellent and terrible leads—many of us have experienced situations where well-meaning bystanders confidently point you in the right direction of the cockatoo they are absolutely certain they saw fly to the northeast, only to discover it was actually a white ibis and your cockatoo was three miles to the south the entire time.

For every size of facility, social media involvement is something to consider beforehand and, ideally, to have a policy pre-written that governs its use in a flyoff situation. It is never a good

idea to lie or mislead the public, but not all information needs to be shared openly if that information may do more harm than good to the operation of recovering your bird. If the flyoff becomes public and gains media attention, be aware of the complications that stem from increasing scrutiny from the community depending on situation. A facility that had a very public escape earlier this year recovered the bird successfully with lots of positive public engagement and involvement, and earned good will (and good publicity) from their community during that time. However, they also dealt with the worst of what the internet has to offer, including armchair animal rights activism and a deluge of incorrect information and false leads to sort through.

Having a strong social media policy in place *before* a flyoff occurs gives you and your team a framework to follow, which is better than having to scramble for a response while you'd rather all of your energy be focused on recovering your animal.

Although it may go without saying, be friendly with the people you meet during flyoffs, especially if you're asking to get onto their property. It doesn't matter how stressed or concerned you are, respect your neighbors and ask kindly for access. As mentioned, the community may help you get the bird back, they are equally capable of hindering you if they are not provided with a reason to help. They don't have the information you do, but most individuals are very willing to help if you're friendly and take the time to explain. We have recovered marabou, hawks, and corvids from neighborhoods in Chicago and Dallas that are commonly considered 'dangerous' in large part through open and friendly communication. Monetary compensation, when needed, may also be the difference between a successful recovery and failure.

Police and other authoritative involvement may additionally help or hinder your search. Sending two trainers into a rough neighborhood in Chicago with telemetry receivers that, from a distance, looked like firearms resulted in a briefly uncomfortable interaction with the Chicago PD, while the local sheriff's office near our facility in Winter Haven, FL, is familiar with us and is often beneficial in smoothing out the metaphorical ruffled feathers of neighbors when our staff are stationed near roadways or community entrances for hours at a time, looking like miscreants. Inviting these authorities to tour our facilities or shows with their children often pays large dividends when flyoffs or other emergencies occur.

Resolving Flyoffs

Each flyoff is a unique situation, and is further complicated by the causative agent, species, environment, and the tools you have at your disposal. A 30-year-old Eurasian eagle-owl with telemetry who missed his perch due to high winds and flew up into a tree for the afternoon may resolve quite differently than a young toucan unexpectedly chased on his first flight outside by a wild red-shouldered hawk.

Once you locate your bird, it is best not to assume anything about that individual's behavior even if you feel you know them quite well. Some previously calm birds may become 'wild' and nervous and may not seem to recognize even a favored trainer. Be cautious on approach. Your very human reaction upon seeing your wayward comrade may be to rush up to them in relief, but careful interaction at this stage can prevent you from 'bumping' them off their perch and having them move even further away. Look for some level of interest and invitation before closing in, and have any needed equipment close by and in position (food, ladder perches, crates, mats, recall tools, vehicles, etc.) *before* asking the animal to do a behavior that may end up putting it in a worse position if it fails. Asking a bird to fly to the hand with a tailwind with a busy roadway behind you is a dangerous way to attempt to resolve a flyoff—sometimes asking the bird to fly slightly further away is the best way to get them down faster!

Make use of the technology you keep in your pocket. Your phone can provide you with accurate information about the timing of first light, sunrise, sunset, and last light. It can judge distance and show direction. You have access to group chats like WhatsApp, you can drop pins and share your location on a map, and you can study satellite imagery of the area that may show groups of forested areas or likely neighborhoods. Even ten years ago, these tools weren't so commonly and easily available. Use technology as a tool and make sure your team knows how to use it too!

Just as importantly, don't forget to make use of the surrounding environment. You may not have spotted your bird yet, but the local songbirds are often the first to tell you that *they* certainly have. We have found wayward owls, cryptically camouflaged, by listening for the tell-tale alarm chirp of a squirrel or by keeping an eye out for a raucous group of jays or crows. Similarly, don't ignore your fellow humans: in a busy area, scanning the crowd for the one family that's pointing or looking upwards has helped us locate lost toucans or macaws.

The human factor

Don't forget that humans are humans. In every multi-day flyoff I've ever been a part of, there have been times of intense stress, grumpy responses on the radio, and sometimes dramatic breakdowns in the middle of the forest.

In NEI flyoffs, however, there are always also moments of incredible silliness, team bonding, and semi-hysterical laughter. These moments of levity are important and necessary to keep people at their best during a difficult and stressful time, so if you are in a supervisory position, remember to be gentle with your staff. They may not share all of the burden of responsibility with you, but some off-topic chatter on the radio when your bird is literally asleep in a tree will absolutely do good for morale. There are in-jokes I remember from notable flyoffs that persist years later and spread to the next generation of trainers who weren't there for the original incident, and the stories that are shared with the team during and after a flyoff is resolved help us pass on information so we can do better in the future.

During the darkest times, stay light-hearted and focused. And don't forget to make sure everyone out on the flyoff is fed, has water, and remains safe in the areas they're travelling in! We're not robots, and we can't do our best for our birds if we're dehydrated or falling asleep at our posts.

You have your bird back – or don't. Now what?

At Natural Encounters, the end of a flyoff isn't ever the end of a flyoff. Not even when you're exhausted, and you desperately want to go home and sleep now that the bird is back with their flock or in their enclosure. At the end of the active phase of a flyoff comes the most important part: the talk-down.

Without analyzing what went well and what could be done better, and then sharing that information with the greater team, we are doing ourselves a disservice when it comes to improving our skills in the future. The talk-down gives us an opportunity—sometimes a very raw one—to discuss frustrations, joys, and the tiny details that mattered.
The questions we ask aren't complex, but they *are* worth asking:

- What did we learn?
- What did we do well?
- What could we improve on?
- What was a disaster?

This is an opportunity to talk about everything and anything significant, from the biggest-picture operational challenges (not enough staff) to the smallest details (no bug-spray in the flyoff kit). Did radios run out of batteries? Is that lady in the yellow house on the corner now a life-long supporter of your organization and provided cookies? Did every available pair of binoculars have a broken strap or scratched lenses? Did we find out the new seasonal is REALLY good at identifying a macaw in flight?

It is worth analyzing the potential cause of the flyoff as well; were there behavioral warning signs before the bird flew off? Was there a cause that we could have controlled or reduced but didn't, and can we mitigate that in the future? Did the animal face additional complications (wind, predators) once they were in the air that made it difficult or impossible for them to return? Did improperly used, poorly prepared, or missing equipment make the situation more difficult for the humans on the team to resolve?

Even if the worst-case scenario has occurred and the bird was either lost, or—similarly—you ended the 'active' phase of the flyoff and are moving to a more passive stage of monitoring and networking, these talkdowns are worth doing, and worth documenting. They may, in situations with undesirable outcomes, also serve as either closure or a launching point for what comes next.

Remember also to reinforce your team once the chaos is all done. Give them the time to recover, thank them for their hard work, and celebrate and share their successes. After significant flyoffs at NEI, Steve almost always ends up sharing takeaways with the entire company via email, and by doing so he gives everyone—both those directly involved and those cheering from the sidelines—the opportunity to add their thoughts and their praise to our sense of closure.

Wrapping it up

Even when everything goes as ideally as possible, *flyoffs suck*. Although there may (and should!) be bright spots during the experience, they are never entirely fun… but they always teach us something about our readiness, our skills, our animals, our facility, and our resources. We know they'll happen and we know they'll be uncomfortable, but if we're well-prepared then we don't need to fear them either— we just need to be ready. And viewing a bird who has returned from a flyoff as an animal that now has more information than its fellows is a great way to change the definition of 'flyoff' in our minds from 'mistake' to 'learning opportunity'.

Remember, also, to try not to let the punishment of the flyoff you just experienced alter your perception of what your animal is capable of. When possible, and the animal is safe and behaviorally sound, giving them another chance to fly the next day may allow that bird to show you what they've learned from their experience, and it will also allow you and your staff to move on with your own training goals rather than holding themselves and the bird back because of fear. Many times, we go right back to training the next day (or sometimes even later the same day), and jump right back on the metaphorical horse—with perhaps an even higher level of behavioral awareness and extra sensitivity to our antecedents and training environment. Getting the bird back in the air shows us what they learned—and sometimes, the lesson they learned may be, "that wasn't fun… stay close next time!"

I have taken an active role in many significant flyoffs both before and after I joined NEI. I have been the trainer directly responsible for the animal in dozens of these flyoffs, and I have learned something from each and every one of them. Most significantly, as mentioned, I no longer view them as shameful mistakes that I have personally made as a trainer, or as an event to hide and only share with the others who experienced that event alongside me. Yes, sometimes those events may have involved errors in human behavior that compounded or even caused the flyoff… but we know to analyze and resolve those errors in the future, and if we truly accept that the animal has agency and offers half of the information in any given interaction, then some flyoffs are inevitable—and the safe resolution of those flyoffs relies on our ingenuity, our ability to share information, and our prompt and responsible response to the situation.

At the end of the day, making sure that everyone is safe—human and animal—is the only thing that matters.