

Some Thoughts on Ambassador Owls

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The conversation about ambassador owls often evolves to discussions about a bird being imprinted or not. With conflicting opinions and varying interpretations of imprinting, i.e., hard imprint, soft imprint, age of chick at imprinting, environmental conditions, etc., it is easy to get distracted from the most important point: the behavior of the bird. In my experience, there is a huge difference in the behavior of an owl raised by humans and an owl raised by its parents in the wild. That's what these thoughts are about.

The behavior and welfare of the bird should always be our most important considerations with any animal in our care. With that as our guiding principle we can better evaluate the best animals to include in our programs.

After more than 40 years of professional experience with a wide variety of owls, I have found owls raised by humans are very often willing participants in handling and training by experienced bird trainers. They are likely to approach a trainer rather than move away and with the right trainer and strategy, they quickly learn to sit on the gloved hand and even fly to a trainer for various forms of reinforcement.

I have also found owls raised by their parents in the wild and brought into human care later in life to be extremely poor subjects for handling, training and use in educational programs. They often show a high level of stress and escape behavior at the approach of a human. Attempting to train a parent-reared owl often involves Flooding, Learned Helplessness, unhealthy weight reduction and overall reduced welfare.

As a behavior consultant, I have an opportunity to observe animal programs at many zoological facilities around the world. With experience at more than 120 facilities, I cannot recall ever seeing an ambassador owl that came from the wild as an adult that voluntarily participated in programs as well as a human-reared owl.

My main concern is with the acquisition of injured owls from rehabilitation facilities for use as an ambassador animal. These birds simply do not adjust to life in human care as well as other raptors and end up with a lifestyle of stress and reduced welfare. There is no training strategy or expert trainer who can help this owl adjust to human care as well

as an owl that was raised as a chick by humans.

The board of directors of IAATE have 184 collective years of professional experience training owls, including 64 parent-reared owls and 122 human-reared owls. The trainers on the board reported none of the parent-reared owls were acceptable ambassador animals. Every board member also remarked that they would never attempt to train a parent-reared owl that came in from the wild. This is the reason IAATE is currently drafting an official Position Statement discouraging the use of parent-reared owls as ambassador animals.

With welfare as our guiding principal, I encourage everyone to reevaluate their ambassador owls' behavior with a critical eye for escape and approach behavior. Does the owl move toward or away from you when you approach? Are there ways to increase approach behavior with reinforcers or more sensitive trainers? These questions, and more, may lead to discussions about training strategies, trainer skill levels, the amount of control the bird experiences in its environment, and is the bird a good subject as an ambassador animal? That question might lead to a discussion about setting up an exhibit for parent-reared owls, and an accession plan for human-reared owls. Other discussions might involve establishing evidence-based indicators of stress and reduced welfare to better evaluate if the current handling and training methods align with the facility's animal management and welfare goals.

Whatever the discussions, the most important step is taking an objective look at the bird's behavior and doing the evaluation, then taking action where it is needed. 🦉

