

# Parrots and Flight: Flight and the Companion Parrot

By Dean Moser, Windsor, Colorado

“Freak!” “Cowboy!” These are some of the names that I have been called because of my affinity for flying my parrots outdoors. I know, I know, danger upon danger lurks out there in the wild outdoors. So I will state clearly from the onset that flying your parrot outdoors is not something that the weak of heart should endeavor to do. In the shadows lurks hazard upon hazard which could end the life of your companion - *so be forewarned*. Everything that I state in this article regarding flight, fledging, and free-flight is just my experience. I am by no means an expert in the realms of this touchy subject.

Having said the above warning, I could never stop flying my parrots outdoors. As strong as the typical warnings are, “What ever you do, make sure your baby is clipped before taking him home!” and “Watch your baby’s flights and make sure the new feathers are clipped as soon as they have grown in!” I couldn’t clip. For me, there is nothing like watching Nick (Red-sided Eclectus) fly through the sky screaming his little head off and Sadie (Eleanora/Medium Sulfur-crested Cockatoo) doing her “widgy - widgy” call floating along on the breeze. It makes my day to have Nick fly to my shoulder and “help” me do the gardening (by eating my green tomatoes), “showering” on my head and shoulder while I mow the yard, or chewing on the roof of my aviary. The birds get so excited to drive out on the plateau near the town where I live because they get to fly in the sky doing figure eights, drops, loop-t-loops, and curves. *However*, it is true – danger is at every corner.

## My Story

My introduction to flight came when I was just a child on a farm in Syracuse, Kansas. I have *always* loved birds and flight. Ducks, geese, chickens, and peacocks were the birds of that time in my life. To be able to see peacocks fly in the air with that enormous tail was amazing. Trying to make domestic ducks and geese fly, well that was a bit frustrating, but there were moments of flight and that was all the encouragement I needed. After leaving the farm at 16 and heading to “city life,” my joy of the outdoors, birds, and flight was put on hiatus for a bit.

It wasn’t until I was almost thirty that I finally had my dreams come true of owning a large companion parrot. I purchased a Red-sided Eclectus pair named Mickey and Molly. Not long after getting them I bought a pet Solomon Island Eclectus named Clover. I was blessed because the house that we lived in had a large room downstairs and I

would fly the birds there for health. It was amazing seeing them fly to and fro in that “small” (remember small is relative now!) space. At this time I only dreamt of flying my birds outdoors, most likely in an outdoor aviary. Then came the day when I read of a “crazy lady” named Chris Shank in California who was flying her flock of cockatoos outdoors along with a lone Yellow-collared Macaw. I was *hooked*! Being somewhat of an internet junkie I happened upon a list for those who, like Chris Shank, were “crazy” and were attempting to fly their birds outdoors. The Yahoo! Group internet list is called the “Freeflight” group and has a sister group called the “Flightphoto” list to post photographs of flying birds. Both lists were started by Chris Biro – [www.thepiratesparrot.com](http://www.thepiratesparrot.com). Dreams began floating in my head of someday owning a bird I could freely outdoors.

I didn’t think at the time that an Eclectus was the species that I could fly outside so I put my dreams on the backburner as I began breeding my two pairs of Eclectus. As anyone who has raised any animal can attest, there comes along that “one in a million” baby with whom I could not part – Nicholas James Moser. What was it about him? He was a fun loving, adventurous, and best bird in the whole wide world – in short, he was *perfect*. One day I was trying to get another baby out of the outdoor aviary and Nick got loose and flew two small circles around me and landed on my hand. Holy stinking cow! I had my freeflyer! What an experience! I was in the clouds!

As with any dream, there has to be some reality to ground us and give us the full story. The next time out Nick didn’t come when I called him. He circled around the house and probably lost his bearings/head and didn’t come back around. After searching for him for close to 15 minutes I saw him fly down the street. Again he didn’t come when I called him. I ran in the direction that he went to find that he had landed on the front of a house. I quickly ran close to the house and you could literally see the relief in his eyes as he promptly flew to my hand. Whew! What a relief!

With that close call came the other side of the coin for those of us who want to take the risk and fly our parrots outdoors – a question that has to be answered. What must we do to ensure that our parrots are *ready* to go outside and take the risks? I have put together my list of essentials with that in mind. I also am going to try and stretch breeders thinking on the “essential” element of flight in the babies that we raise. I realize that one of the most difficult realities is changing the thinking of someone who has “done it this

way for years and if it ain't broke then don't fix it." I hope one can consider the perspective of someone who has only been breeding for a short five years.

### **Fledging and its Affects on Young Psittacines**

It is my contention that flight is one of the most crucial building blocks to a young psittacines well being next to enough warm mushy food. I know this is a strong statement, but I truly believe it to be correct for multiple reasons.

The first reason comes from the differences that I have seen in the babies that I have fledged. (By fledged I mean this: a baby that has learned how to fly, by stopping, starting, landing where it chooses, and practices this often so it can do it well.) They have such a sense of *adventure*. I like how Tom Beard on the Freeflight list gives a taste of this. If Elliot, his Goffin's cockatoo, won't come when he is called, Tom will get on the ground and make it look like he is playing with something or looking at something that is *very interesting*. Sure enough, Elliot is there in a heartbeat because he *has* to see what Tom is so enthralled with. I have seen the same thing in my baby Eclectus. One night I was working on my brooder for the babies and one of the babies could not contain himself and had to fly over to see what it was that so fascinated me. Eventually, after the baby worked through his fear of the unknown, his curiosity got him and he landed on my shoulder to check out what it was and what I was doing. This kind of thing happens time and time again. One can literally see the babies go through their stages as they mature and "grow" up and the best part is that they never seem to grow out of it.

The second reason that I believe so strongly in fledging baby psittacines is one word: *Volition*. Trying to get a baby that was never fledged to "volitionally" fly to you can be very tough and sometimes impossible. There is something about the young babies brains when they are developing that I believe isn't much different than a human brain. They seem to be able to adapt and think for themselves. When a baby misses this "window of opportunity" they struggle being able to "think outside of the box" if you will. This is similar to what we see in elephants at circuses. As babies they are chained with large chains to a post that they could *never* get away from. They fight and fight and fight some more until they finally give up never to try again unless utter terror comes upon them. Many people are absolutely amazed that these monsters are tied up with only a small rope to a small post in the ground. Once the "leash" is attached, the elephant won't leave.

In the birds that I have seen that haven't been fledged, I see the same thing. Many on the Freeflight list have struggled with this reality. Many have ultimately given up trying to get their bird to fly of their own will.

This observable fact is what Jane Healy writes about in her book, *Why Children Don't Think and What We Can*

*Do About It*. It is Jane's contention that the human brain starts out with millions upon millions of neurons (the little guys in our brains that allow impulses to get from one part of the body/brain to another with information) and it is as we grow up or mature that these neurons go away or die off due to lack of use thus creating "highways" or roads, if you will, where information is passed. If I can take the liberty to correlate this to baby birds, this means that if the "highway" for flight is not established, then they develop a hump that they have to climb over in order to learn that skill that was never learned as a baby. This hump is completely mental; the bird has all of the God given abilities, structure, and physical make up to do so. To go back to the illustration of the elephant, the elephant has *all* of the abilities to break free from the small rope just the *mental* inability to do so.

Thirdly is the issue of confidence. Birds that have been fledged are confident and full of themselves. If something scares them they fly. It is as easy as that. For a bird that is "afraid" of flight they have two hurdles running at them: fear of flight and fear of the object or situation they are presented with.

If Nick, my Red-sided Eclectus, lands on something that is too slick, he moves on to another – no stress and no strain. But for Sadie, my seven year old Eleanora Cockatoo who wasn't fledged, there is the stress of "where" she is going to land, the stress of finding that place, and the stress of getting there. I wish the differences could be easily explained but they can't. I have had friends tell me, "Dean, my bird flies." To which I promptly ask, "Does he fly from point A to point B because he wants to? Or did something scare him and he flew out of fear?" Those are entirely different situations. Nick flies out of fear but he also flies because he wants to and because he has places to go and people to see. Sadie doesn't fly like that. Sadie is trying to get over those humps that are in the "highways" in her brain. Although Sadie thoroughly enjoys her flying experiences, in a lot of ways they are stressful for her.

A young parrot has no fear! They crash – they get up and get going again. They crash again and they get up yet again. But each time, they are learning the skills that they are going to take with them into their future years without much concern for the crashes in between. For the non-fledged bird there is the stress/fear, the mental humps, and the skills that were never learned. The confidence side of the coin is crucial, in my mind, for us to raise babies that are prepared for what life has to hand them.

### **The Cost**

As with everything, there is a cost. Imagine this: Babies flying all over my house with formula hanging out of their mouths. Formula found in every conceivable spot on our walls, carpets – even the corner of our vaulted ceiling. We also have chewed up plants (safe plants I might add), chewed on window sills and poop in areas I never

thought possible. I've had babies hanging off of our lights, pictures, microwave, dish drainer, and ears (kids really liked that one). I've even had babies hanging off of my hair trying to drink from the same drink I was drinking! These are just a few of the "fun" times that one can have when they fledge their babies in their living area.

And then there are the not so fun times. I have never lost a baby because of it hitting anything but I have heard of it happening. Hit by a ceiling fan. Escape. Toes lost due to landing on another bird's cage. Like I said in the beginning, fledging and flight are not something for the weak of heart!

Thankfully, I have never lost a baby due to any of these reasons. I believe this is because I have tried to be prepared. I have converted my basement into a fledging area. I have ropes hanging from the ceiling (great for learning balance and skill on a moving object). I have things covered. I have the floors covered in soft carpet vs. hard surfaces like hardwood floors, tile, or linoleum. I also have the babies in a larger flight where they can learn that precious skill of landing in a smaller space. All the birds that are "dangerous" to those precious toes are removed and placed in safe areas. And then the babies are "set free" to roam and have fun for a good hour or two at a time per day. Sometimes after flying around for a good 5-15 minutes they settle down to grind their beaks and rest. Then all of a sudden that second wind comes. They get loud, boisterous, and crazy – dancing and flying like crazy birds. It is so fun to watch. The new ones struggle to hold on to the top of the cage and land in such a way as to not slide down the side and then give up and fly to the other side of the room on top of the hutch. This is *fun*! And I can see that the babies are having fun as well. For me, the danger is worth the risk because of the joy on the other side.

I raise only Eclectus so the financial cost to fledge is really quite low. But the cost to fledge a baby macaw is going to be much more. It would be extremely difficult to properly fledge a Green-winged Macaw in a "little" house. A gymnasium would work. A really large aviary would be a possibility. With this comes the realization that there is going to be a financial cost for us to do this correctly.

### **Why – What is the Value of Fledging My Babies?**

Many of you are probably asking the question, "Why? Why would I want to do this?" There are multiple reasons but I find one to be the main reason for my desire to fledge babies – the health of the bird, not only physically but mentally and emotionally as well. I raise Eclectus and the differences I am seeing in their health are amazing. I have videos where one would think they are a cockatoo with green feathers! They hang from ropes, swinging the rope by flapping their wings, all the while screaming at the top of their lungs. They are actively interested in what is going on vs. being the "sit back and watch" birds that they are typically stated to be. These babies are anything but stodgy. I

have to watch Nick because he will steal my screws when I'm making nestboxes! He isn't scared of what is going on around him because he knows he can get away and even if he were clipped I doubt he would be as concerned as a bird that didn't have the foundation that he has.

### **Some Thoughts on Freeflight**

Freeflight isn't for everyone and it definitely isn't for every parrot. I have traveled the road of trying to "refledge" an older parrot and it is difficult. Literally, the amount of work that it takes to get them to a proficient level is almost daunting. I'm blessed that I live in Colorado where we have open plains for miles and I can take these birds out and let them fly as far as they want. Even with the space that we have, these birds never reached the level of skill that Nick has. The fun part is seeing them make baby steps each time we go out. The frustration is seeing them struggle day in and day out with what Nick makes look so simple.

Sadie came to me as a seven year old hen that hadn't been clipped forever but there was no need, since she never flew anywhere. After some bonding time with her we went out to open prairie and let her go. It was amazing! She went *straight up*! And then she didn't know how to come down. Honestly the only thing that brought her down that first couple times was sheer exhaustion. She didn't have landing skills and only knew how to glide and landed on the open ground time and time again. It is here where most people get into trouble with reflighting an older bird – the issue of landing. Try to fly a bird like Sadie in a town with trees and you are talking disaster! She could never get down unless she climbed. There were so many skills that she lacked. She would want to come down but couldn't figure out how.

Some would say that you can deal with this with proper training and that may be true – but where and how? For this reason, in most instances, I advocate that people get a fledged baby that has never been clipped vs. trying to refledge an older bird. The hurdles are just too many and too large with an older bird. However, this doesn't mean that you can't refledge an older bird indoors. Many are the benefits mentally, physically, and emotionally for the older birds who can at least learn to fly proficiently indoors. I know your bird will thank you.

Another issue of consideration when thinking about freeflight is that of species. Some species are not the greatest candidates for freeflight. The best in my opinion are the cockatoos and conures. There is nothing like a cockatoo's bond to work with. They may not be food motivated but that bond is priceless. As far as reflighting a bird, I believe the cockatoo is the best candidate. They seem to be one of the most capable of learning past that window of opportunity.

From talking to others, one of the most difficult species may be the African Greys. That fight or flight response in a Grey is so strong that when they take off they "shut off brain" and "turn on motor," and thus get lost eas-



*Sadie comin' down (my Eleanora/Medium Sulfur-crested Cockatoo). Nick sits on the shoulder of Ed Levy waiting for his chance to show off. Look at all this wonderful unobstructed space for free flying.*



Photos by Dean Moser

*Nick (Red-sided Eclectus) in take-off form with Sadie fussing around for a steady perch.*

ily. Along with the Greys are the *Poicephalus* parrots for the same reason as the Greys.

Please realize that these are just my observations and the moment I write the above someone is going to say, "Well my cockatoo flew away!" or "I have been flying my Grey outside for years without a hitch!" That is part of the joy and frustration of these birds – they always keep us on the edge of our seats unwilling to "fit" the mold *all* the

time.

So you want to fly your fledged baby outside and take the risk – here are some things to think about according to Chris Biro. First, your baby needs to be familiar with the surroundings in which she will be flying. Any parrot, no matter how strong the bond, is capable of "losing its head" when it gets scared. If it knows the area in which it lives, there isn't as much of a concern. Nick had been in the out-



door aviary many times before he got loose so he knew where home was. It was when he flew to the front of the house that he was “lost.” If you can get the bird familiar with the area in which she will be flying the risks drop considerably.

Physical fitness is the second thing to think about. Your baby needs to be in good shape. Being in poor shape could be the difference between life and death if a hawk were to show up. To give you an example of how physically taxing flight is for these birds I have a story. My family went on a vacation for two weeks a couple years ago when Nick was younger. When we got back I let Nick out in the backyard to fly like normal not even thinking that it had been two weeks since he had been flown outside. He flew one time around the house and could barely make it back around to the fence to land because he was so utterly exhausted. The following winter I didn’t take the birds outside much because I was concerned that they wouldn’t be able to handle the cold weather (I’ve since changed my thinking on that one). Nick flew in the house everyday with the fledging babies but hadn’t flown outside for at least three months. We finally got a nice day and I let him out to fly. He didn’t even make it around the house once, and landed in my neighbor’s yard.

Recall is absolutely essential to being successful in outdoor flight. Paulie in a tree at the neighbor’s house doesn’t do us any good unless we can get him to come down. Recall “reasons” can come in different shapes and sizes. Many of the cockatoos could care less about food but would die for a scratch on the head. Sunflowers are almost always a hit. And the crème de la crème of all recall favorites has to



*Every flight feather is in use as Raina, a Green-winged Macaw gets airborne. Flight helper, Rebekah watches in background.*



*Tex, the human tree, is holding (left to right) Nick, the Red-sided Eclectus, Sadie, Eleanora Cockatoo, and Henry, a Triton Cockatoo—all enjoy the great outdoors.*

be cheese. You want to use whatever it takes to get the bird to come when you call him to you. An interesting note regarding recall and that motivation item refers back to the first point of familiarity with the surroundings. If the bird is unfamiliar with the area, food is going to be the last thing on her mind. She is going to be agitated and concerned and unwilling to think from a calm perspective. Your state of mind also plays into this. Being empathic by nature she is going to sense your concern and stress and that is going to exacerbate the problem. Relax and enjoy the experience. If you have done your homework and the leg work, things should go smoothly.

Going hand in hand with recall is some form of formal training. The buzz word in training circles lately has been clicker training. Karen Pryor has a great book out there called "Don't Shoot the Dog" that teaches this simple method of operant conditioning using a small little clicker. This method uses positive reinforcement to get our bird/animal(s) to do what we want them to do. The goal with freeflight is to have our bird(s) be familiar with a "language" that we both understand. Having a clicker trained bird goes a long way in the arena of freeflight.

An absolutely essential component of freeflying your parrot outside is that the bird be fully flighted. Some have made the mistaken assumption that if they clip a couple feathers he won't be able to get as far away from me and can learn how to do things before he has them all in. This thinking couldn't be further from the truth. Falconers know how crucial *every* feather is to their bird flying to the best of its ability, so much so that they imp the feathers in when they have been lost. (This is the process of using an old molted feather to replace a current feather that has been lost.) The bird ultimately has no gaps in its feathers thus slowing it down and costing it precious energy and skill. So, in spite of our best intentions, it is important that the bird have all his feathers to accommodate everything that is needed to fly in the most efficient manner.

Wow what a ride this has been! I'm riding this wave of exhilaration, learning as I go. I'm excited to see the changes in the thinking of breeders and pet owners regarding flight and fledging in their companion parrots. As is always the case, there is so much that we don't know about these beautiful creatures. With that being said, I would like to specifically thank a few of those who brought about the change in my thinking regarding this delicate period in a psittacines' life: Phoebe Linden and Eb Cravens for providing the precious early information that I read and doing it in such a way that it kick-started me in the right direction; Chris Shank for being daring enough to actually practice this thing called freeflight and sharing it with us in writing; Chris Biro for facilitating and providing the "space" where many of us around the world can share our thoughts, ideas, and stories regarding flight both indoors and out. And a special thanks to Katy McElroy for teaching this beginner how

to go about fledging in a practical way from a breeder's perspective – your friendship means the world.

Most of you will never freefly your parrot outside. If I have at least planted a seed in your head regarding the importance of flight in the psittacines life I feel I have accomplished much. Go ahead and live on the edge a little and let "Paulie" grow in his wings. Fly him back and forth between you and your friend or be really crazy like a group of people in Seattle who have gone as far as to rent an old building to fly their birds twice a week. And if you are really adventurous you'll come hang out with a group of us here in Colorado who fly our birds outside. Happy flying!

*Dean Moser lives in Windsor, Colorado where he breeds Eclectus parrots. He has been flying his pet Nick for the past two years and has refledged a Green-winged Macaw named Raina and an Eleanora Cockatoo named Sadie. He is married and has three children. To contact him regarding fledging or freeflight, visit: [www.shadeselectus.com](http://www.shadeselectus.com). ♦*

## AFA's Big 30th Anniversary **Convention** coming up on **August 4-7, '04**

Come early, stay late.

San Francisco is a city you will want to spend some time to see: Fisherman's Wharf and Pier 39, Alcatraz, Ghirardelli Square, Chinatown, S.F. Zoo Golden Gate Bridge, unique shops, etc., and of course, there is the great time you'll have at the Convention.

Make hotel reservations with the  
**Hyatt Regency San Francisco Airport**  
1333 Bayshore Hwy, Burlingame, CA  
**Phone: 800-233-1234**

**See inside dust jacket for  
Convention Registration form.**

**Phone: 901-853-6079**

**Fax: 901-853-8452 or**

**Email: [ConventionCentral@idealbirds.com](mailto:ConventionCentral@idealbirds.com)**