

Pirates 'n Parrots

(or Free-flying Birds)

Stage I:
a Real Stage With Actors

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Portland, Oregon

The soft, cloudy skies of an Oregon June herald the opening of the famous Portland Rose Festival. Among those performers who greeted the thousands of Festival visitors this year were Captain Chris Biro, his first mate Gudrun Maybaum and their parrots of ESENCE, (Endangered Species & Environments, National Center for Education). With the miniature replica of a masted pirate ship as a backdrop, Captain Chris and Gudrun presented their crew of 17 parrots, representing inhabitants of all continents. The Pirates of ESENCE travel the county educating the public on the wonders of parrots as well as the plight they face in the wild. Captain Chris asks, "Why do Pirates say "MRRRRR?" The answer "Because they Recycle, Reuse Reduce and Rethink!"

With flowing dark hair, a three day growth of beard and dressed in authentic 17th century pirate garb, Captain Chris commands the attention of the crowd. The most commonly asked question, particularly from the children, "Is that sword real?"

In the 25 minutes of presentation, before the crowd is allowed to hold and pet the birds, Chris talks about parrots, what makes them different from other birds, their plight in the wild, their special needs in the home and the lifetime commitment they require. Jack, a seven-year-old Blue and Gold Macaw lays comfortably on her back in his hands as he lifts her high to show the zygodactyl foot of a parrot, "Two toes forward, two toes backward," he explains. "This is one of the things that makes a parrot different from most other birds."

Then Gudrun takes her beloved Janice, a six year old Green-winged



Between shows, folks gather around to look at the Pirate's set-up.

Macaw, out into the crowd while Chris explains how parrots have the ability to move both their upper and lower mandibles, which is another thing that makes them distinctive.

On command, Janice flies to Chris, swooping low over the heads of the crowd, her nearly four-foot long wingspan beating rhythmically to the gasps of the onlookers. The awesome sight of such a bird in flight cannot be adequately described in words, but the beauty of a creature free of the bounds of earth, at home in the air is something not soon forgotten.

A quick "Good bird," a smooch on the head and the promise of an almond entices Janice to show the crowd how she can indeed move her upper beak, with enough power to snap a broomstick should she wish.

Janice is the most experienced of the Pirates' flyers. Trained to work with them since she was six months old, Janice has known flight all her life. She will usually content herself to fly in across the heads of the crowd, her huge wings beating an audible hum.

Even with her experience and dependability, the unfamiliar noises of the water front startle her to flight and Janice banks toward the skyline of Portland. Fortunately, the Park Blocks of the Rose City boast many trees and Janice chooses the tallest in which to land.

Very comfortable with Janice's skills

of flight and landing, Gudrun positions herself under the tree calling frequently, enticing Janice down with promises of tasty treats. Janice is in control, she chooses the time she will come down after thoroughly surveying all within her sight, she decides the 7-Grain birdy sandwich is too delicious and she glides/hovers in for a nearly vertical, but perfectly executed, descent and landing on Gudrun's arm, quickly followed by a warm embrace.

Janice rides high atop Gudrun's arm as she returns to the joyous welcome of her peers. She spends the next few minutes in "time out" where she remains safely secured in her cage until her next performance.

Not for the faint of heart, the events of the next few minutes drive home the importance of having free-flighted birds only under properly trained conditions.

The Pirates' stage is only a few feet from the berth of the *Portland Spirit*, a luxury dining cruise ship which plies the waters of the Willamette River. As the *Spirit*, embarks on its afternoon cruise, the crew must sound the air horn, one long blast for departure, three short blasts to announce it is backing away from the dock. The unexpected noise startles all the birds and the flighted ones, Obie (a Patagonian Conure) and Red Claw (a Mitred Conure) bolt from their perches, soaring upward they meet and take flight side by side.



A veteran of many shows, Janis, the Green-winged Macaw flies back to the Pirate.

Captain Chris blows his coache's whistle, the "flock contact call" with which he trains them. The other birds, whose carefully clipped wings keep them grounded, call out to the flyers, the ensuing pandemonium sets in the minds of the flyers where their home is, where they are safe and to where must return.

Obie and Red Claw are free, seemingly oblivious to the calls below, on they soar. High, high high they go, a quick turn to the east and they soar out over the wide Willamette River, follow it south over the historic Hawthorne Bridge and blocks from their anxious flock. Chris calmly explains to the crowd what has just happened, the tiny birds have flown out of sight but he knows they will return. Only a momentary break in concentration betrays his pounding heart as he tells the crowd to keep an eye on the sky. The show goes on.

One minute – they were last seen as they flew toward the bridge, quickly lost in the soft gray of the misty sky.

Two minutes – there they are – over the trees by the "Tilt A World" carnival ride, still flying side by side they make an approach.

Three minutes – a quick visual on home base and a teasing approach and low fly-by they bank westward toward the towers of the Portland sky-

line, blocks to go, again lost to sight.

Four minutes – still intoxicated by their wild adventure, the little birds circle again. "They're coming in" someone shouts from the crowd.

Nearly exhausted by their adventure, the two little birds descend over the heads of the crowd, fan their tails, tip their wings and gently land on their perches, hovering for only a heart beat as they home in on their landing zone.

Gudrun welcomes them home with up-stretched arms quickly showering them with kisses and "Good Birds!" Captain Chris pauses from his presentation long enough to give a gentle scratch and an almond which is greedily snatched from his fingers. They have returned.

The parrots of ESENCE are accustomed to new and unusual circumstances. They make their living going where no bird has gone before, quietly remaining on their perches for hours at a time, meeting thousands of new people and experiencing all manner of new and different sights and sounds.

The solidarity of the ESENCE bird crew is important to the flyers, the other birds sound their flock contact call which acts like a beacon to bring them home. A particularly dependable sentinel, Gilmore, the African Grey chose the Rose Festival to inaugurate his new flock call.

Watching the excitement generated when the birds took off and hearing Chris and Gudrun anxiously blowing their whistles for the flyers, Gilmore learned he too could gain attention by "blowing his whistle," an exact imitation of the familiar referee's whistle the Pirates use for a contact call. To the pleasure and amusement of the crowd, Gilmore bounces from foot to foot sounding "Wheeeeeee, Wheeeeeee!" while the others call out in bird sounds. Obie and Red Claw never doubt the loyalty and support of their flock.

As the days of the Festival pass by, the flyers make numerous flight demonstrations without a glitch. But to continue this too long would be dull, so once again recalcitrant flyers choose to spice things up a little. Chris takes Red Claw into the crowd for another "fly-in" and as he approaches the stands Obie decides to fly out to meet him. The two birds greet each other in mid air, bank in a tight circle over the crowd and take to the sky. Chris sounds his whistle, Gilmore blows his whistle and the other birds all call out as the pair makes formation and heads out over the river.

Hearts beat faster and the birds follow the river, soaring and swooping to the ancient cadence of the dragon boat races below. Red Claw is strong and confident, he takes the lead and together the friends fly on. Minutes pass with no sign of them, the many perils they face loom in the minds of the crowd.

Will an arrogant crow or sea gull attract them in mid-air? Will they lose track of where home is? Will they be forced to land where they are caught by a predator or some well-meaning person who does not know where they belong? Will they have the strength to make it back?

Minutes pass and anxious eyes scan the horizon for a glimpse when suddenly in they come. Side by side they fly in low across the bows of the Navy war ships, tiny specks against the gray of the mighty sea going vessels. The raucous cries of their earth-bound flock welcome them home as they gently hover to alight, eagerly awaiting their almond. One more time they have returned. 