

# Taming a Wild Macaw

PART 2

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Once the acclimation period is completed and it has been determined that the new macaw is in good health, the first taming lessons can begin. The most effective trainer must thoroughly examine his daily routine, and plan to give taming lessons on a regular basis when free time is most available. The decision to tame and keep a macaw as a pet requires the owner to devote time to the task each and every day. After the basic taming is accomplished, it is imperative for the macaw owner to understand that pet macaws need daily attention (not just daily maintenance) to thrive happily in the human environment. To tame a wild macaw, it is necessary to give at least three formal lessons per day. Taming can be accomplished by pet owners who work full-time, if the lessons are planned and administered properly.



Photo by Risa Teitler

*A natural branch, minimum of 2" diameter, is recommended for training sticks. A wild macaw will step more willingly onto something that gives a secure foot grip.*

Taming your own pet macaw is an exciting and rewarding experience. Should you decide to have a professional trainer tame the wild bird, be aware that you will still have to put in a considerable amount of time to properly *socialize* your new pet. The role of the professional trainer cannot substitute for the ongoing relationship between a pet macaw and its human owner.

## Taming Equipment

Taming equipment should be considered carefully when the macaw is purchased. Your cage is one of the most important pieces of taming equipment you will invest in. Cage design and its effect on the ease of taming cannot be ignored. The size and location of the door, or a door that is too small, will discourage the wild macaw from leaving the con-

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finer of the cage. Large doors that are centered in the front of the cage will assist you in convincing the wild bird to leave the cage voluntarily. A low door, or one that is too small, will discourage the macaw from leaving the cage.

Cage size is also a factor in determining the ease of the early lessons. Overly large cages, although perfect for the bird's long-term housing, can make taming a wild bird more difficult. A wild bird who finds its large cage very comfortable and secure may not be willing to leave it for the training stand. Ideally, the macaw should be kept in a smaller cage for the beginning taming and moved into a larger one as taming progresses. The type of taming cage I have found most effective is square or rectangular, not too tall and has dimensions of approximately 36 inches by 36 inches by 30 inches deep. Overall height of the taming cage is 54 inches. The cage described is obviously too small for permanent living quarters, however, the small size does encourage the

wild macaw to seek the outside bird stand for greater liberty. Using the knowledge of the macaw's need for liberty (to exist in space without boundaries), I have found the small taming cage decreases the amount of time necessary to achieve basic taming with the majority of wild, imported macaws. Some macaws will jump out of any cage as soon as an exit is provided, no matter how large and roomy the cage, but for most wild macaws, the smaller training cage will assist a novice trainer.

The *training stand* is the single most important piece of equipment that you will need to tame a wild macaw. The stand must be a separate piece of equipment and should not be part of the macaw cage. Cages that have lift off tops (thereby doubling as cage and stand) are not recommended. It may be more difficult in the initial stages of taming to move the bird from the cage to the stand, however, *moving the bird from one location to another* is a very important aspect of socialization. That is: your macaw learns to *move with you* from one location to another. I do not recommend bird stands that are part of the cage top for similar reasons. In fact, I discourage all macaw owners from allowing their birds to sit on the cage top. Many macaws develop strong possessive attitudes towards their cages. If allowed to become rooted to the cage top, your macaw may fight you when you attempt to take it off of the cage. This can result in the bird biting you. Part of my philosophy in macaw taming is to *avoid getting bitten*. You must always evaluate the potential situations that may incite the bird to bite you, and avoid these situations.

Other features of a macaw training stand are durability, absolute stability (the stand must not rock), a removable catch tray that can be cleaned and disinfected, and a cross perch that can be changed periodically. It is also important that feed dishes be removable. In later stages of training, the feed and water dishes can be used to advantage on the training stand, but not in the earliest lessons. Perch diameter must be suitable for the macaw's large feet. A 1" diameter perch is too narrow. A diameter of 2" or more is recommended, to afford the macaw a secure grip. The wild macaw is less likely to bite you when it has a secure grip on the open perch.

The 2" diameter size is also recommended for training sticks that you

will use for taming the bird. Natural wood is the best material for all of the bird's perches and training sticks. Tree limbs with the bark intact make the best possible perches and training sticks. Beginning trainers should keep three training sticks on hand, especially in the first lessons. Two 24" and one 18" training stick are suggested. These sticks are best when they have knobby areas for the bird to grasp. Diameter can vary from 1" to 2" on the same stick affording the wild bird a choice of grips.

The training stand should not be ornate. A "T" style stand is preferred for beginning training. An "H" style is also suitable.

Other equipment you may want to invest in includes: one large bird net to rescue the macaw if it gets into trouble, climbs under the sofa or into electrical outlets. The best use of the net is not capturing the macaw, but rather for shooing the bird away from danger zones. Macaws instinctively move away from capture nets, so these can be very effective as a tool for moving the bird away from danger, across the floor and back to the training stand. Once your new macaw is back at the base of the stand, put the net aside and use a training stick to place the bird back onto the stand.

*Welding gloves have no place in taming a wild macaw using the methods I advocate.* If you work carefully and pay attention to what you are doing, you will probably not get bitten. Most macaws will do little more than pinch you and let go, unless you corner and frighten them. Grinding, damaging bites most often result from the trainer frightening the macaw or pushing it into a situation that it cannot escape from without biting. Keep in mind that most wild macaws would rather run from you than bite you.

### Content of the Early Lessons

You should not attempt to arm tame the macaw until you have worked seriously on teaching the bird to step onto and off of the training stick. My approach to training is designed to facilitate arm taming, however, the content of the first lessons does not include arm taming, unless you have a very quick student bird. The content of the early lessons follows a logical sequence that allows both the wild bird and the novice trainer to progress together. The slow pace allows time for the bird to gain

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trust in the human handler and for the human handler to gain confidence in his ability to tame the wild macaw. As the bird begins to integrate the basic behaviors of the early lessons into its active daily life, the likelihood of the trainer sustaining a damaging bite decreases.

There are six basic behaviors incorporated into the early lessons. These are: stick training, stand training, arm training, leaving and returning to the cage on training stick and arm, leaving and returning to the training stand on stick or arm and accepting food reward and liquid refreshment from the trainer.

Stick training is the first behavior the wild macaw should be exposed to. Novice trainers should concentrate on only stick training in the earliest lessons. The first lesson may consist of simply opening the cage door and allowing the bird to climb out of the cage. Some birds may refuse to leave the cage. A few lessons may pass in this manner, with the cage door open and the wild bird remaining in the cage. Be patient. Eventually the macaw will decide to exit. Once this occurs, work the bird on the floor, presenting the training stick and encouraging the bird to step onto it. Most birds acquire this simple behavior in just two to three days of lessons. A nervous macaw may take far longer. Should your student bird run from the stick, try to work it over to a corner of the training area and use a second stick to work the bird's feet up off the floor. *Do not strike the bird on the feet!* Present the stick at a slight angle and use the second stick to direct the macaw's beak up and away from the floor.

Once your macaw does step onto the stick, continue to work close to the floor, teaching the bird to step onto and off of the stick. Mastery of this simple behavior will come quickly to the majority of macaws. Once this skill is acquired, the stage is set to begin teaching the macaw to remain on the stand. Stand training consists of teaching the macaw to step onto and off of the open perch. Using the stick to accomplish this point of beginning taming will teach the bird the automatic response necessary for arm taming to proceed smoothly. Automatic responses with the feet will, like the formation of a bond of trust, decrease the chance that your student bird will injure you with its bite. Allow the bird to remain on the open stand between lessons

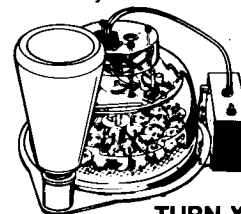
for extended periods of time. This will allow the macaw to accept liberty and help it become rooted in the new environment. All of the time associated with the early lessons gives the wild macaw time to gradually integrate into a human household and establish itself as a natural part of the household. This gradual integration is the actual process of *socialization*. A socialized macaw is less likely to bite you when you begin arm taming.

Some macaws step onto your arm at this point in the training as though it was their idea all along. Others must be worked from the training stick, picked up off of the stand and coaxed onto your arm. There are several variations in the method by which you can arm tame your macaw. The method that you use will be determined by the personality of your student bird. You can present your arm to the bird's feet and coax it onto your arm with food reward, or you may find it better to stroke the bird's feet with one hand, while using the other to distract the bird's attention. Use your *distracting hand* to keep the bird's head focused up and away from your arm. You may use the training stick as a medium for easing the transition of the bird's acceptance to your arm. This is why it is so important to teach your macaw the *automatic* response of stepping onto and off of a training stick. The automatic response of the bird's feet, and the resultant motion, one foot stepping up after the other, will help the novice trainer to arm tame the macaw.

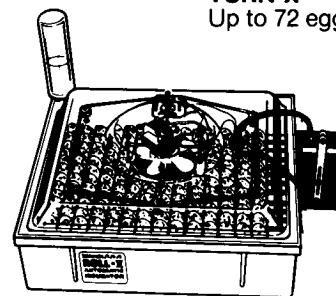
One thing is certain, the greater amount of time you allow to elapse between the first day of acclimation and the day you begin arm taming, the greater the bond of trust that will develop between you and the new macaw. This bond is the factor that will prevent you from being severely bitten by a wild macaw. In many cases, the early taming and eventual arm training of a macaw can be accomplished without the trainer ever receiving a bite that breaks the skin. Work carefully. Respect your macaw's intelligence. For the majority of wild macaws, aggression is used only to ward off an overzealous trainer. Use time to your advantage, and allow your highly intelligent macaw to become socialized. Arm taming will occur as a natural process of the developing rapport between bird and human handler. ●

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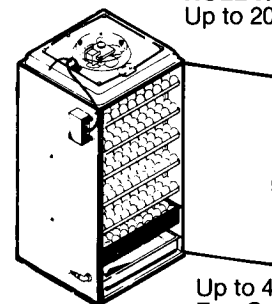
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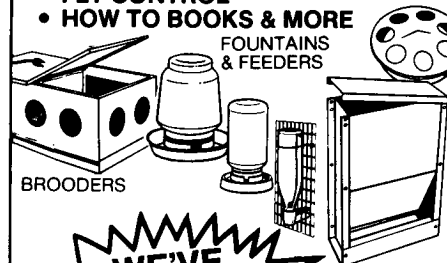
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