

Taiwanese Lifestyle Through the Eyes of CC
Chapter 4. Outdoor Free-Flight Training

A bird in hand is a certainty. But a bird in the bush may sing.

— Bret Harte

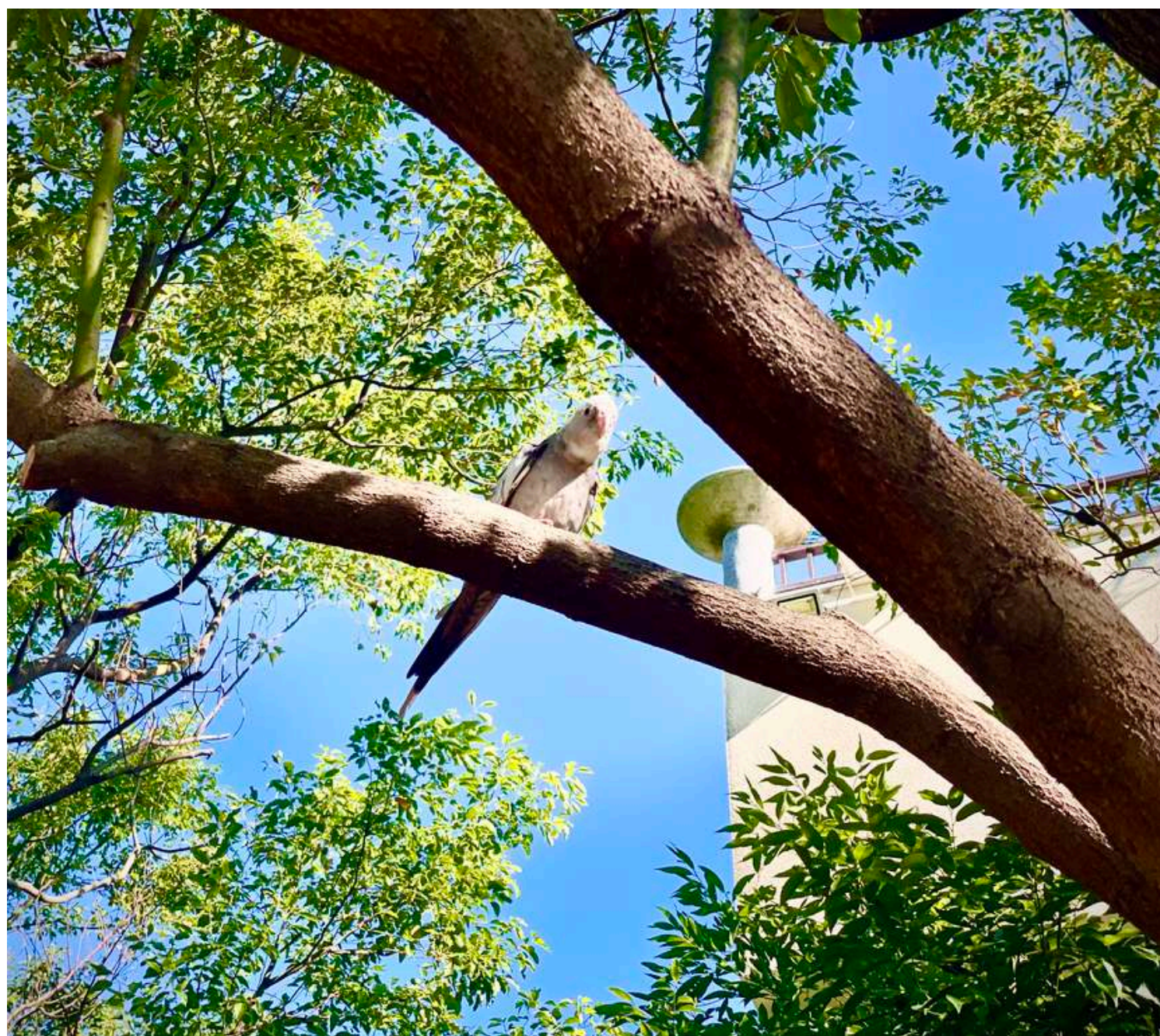


Fig. 1: Dr. Chang with Juno the cockatiel on his hand and Bagel the monk parakeet on his shoulder, enjoying a snack break by the lake in their neighborhood reserve. Visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeogP8pU8Tw> to learn all about their outdoor training process.

When shown the videos of the Changs' cockatiel Juno and monk parakeet (also known as a Quaker parrot) Bagel in the neighborhood reserve, sometimes flying freely and sometimes leisurely perching on Dr. Chang's shoulders for a stroll, the bird shop owner from where these feathered children were purchased was simply lost for words. During the 40 odd years that he has been running his business, never had he imagined that these birds would be able to develop such a bond with their keeper, especially when taken outdoors.

Free flight outdoors for pet birds is as much of a training course for humans as it is for birds; the safety of the birds must be ensured and potential heartbreak for the owners can be prevented. A crucial ability required of the keepers is to *let go*. However, this does not imply just unleashing the birds from their aviary regardless of the consequences.

The three keys to outdoor free-flight training are *trust*, *safety*, and *technique*. As in any relationship, *trust* is cultivated through love, and a straightforward manifestation of love is quality time spent together. It is important that trust has been established before taking the birds outdoors so that the second key, *safety*, can be maintained at its most fundamental level. As for the trainer and his training skills, they are obviously as essential as the doctor and mechanics are in orthodontics. Without a doctor's careful evaluation and professional execution (*safety*), the *trust* between the doctor and the patient, as well as their mutual dedication (*love*) the mechanics and techniques cannot flourish - restricting the magic to reach its full potential.



The technical part of bird training is best started indoors. Two foundations should be laid down at the beginning of the training: trigger and positive reinforcement. To generate a target action, hand gestures serve as a cue to naturally elicit the birds' reflective behavior - a flip of the palm to send birds flying from the trainer's hand (Figs. 2-3) or raising a hand for birds in flight to perch on (Fig. 4). Props like a whistle can be used to send reoccurring signals - birds associate the signals to the actions - and this is when a trigger is established. After correctly performing a target action following a trigger, positive rewards such as snacks should be immediately presented to reinforce the trigger - this is called positive reinforcement. With repeated practice, reliable recall can be achieved, meaning birds can consistently and correctly respond to the trainer's triggers.

Once reliable recall has been successfully established, the birds are almost ready to be taken outdoors. The last step is to survey the environment the birds will fly around in. It is important to minimize risk factors such as predators and natural obstacles (dense forests, strong winds etc.). Embarking upon their first few flights, pet birds could unexpectedly fly high and far, due to excitement or nervousness, the latter being relatively more hazardous. Therefore, before allowing them to fly freely, it is advisable



Figs. 2-3: A flip of the hand while your bird is resting on it provides a gestural cue to naturally elicit flight. Keep in mind NOT to force a bird to fly when it does not want to!

to choose a tree for them to play and snack in whilst familiarizing themselves with their new infinite surroundings. Upon future farther and higher exploration, this tree and the area around it can provide anchorage, so whenever these feathered children feel lost in a strange part of the woods, they can return to this sanctuary. Reciprocally, with the reassurance that they are safely anchored, hopefully these children can venture into higher branches, knowing that they are guarded, and that they are capable. You, as the trainer, might take on just the same role as the anchoring tree, not only for your birds, but also for those you train.



Fig. 4: Holding out a hand towards a bird in flight is an invitation to perch. Illustration by the talented artist, Jenny Chang.



Fig. 5: Positive rewards such as snacks should be presented immediately after a correct response to the trigger, thereby reinforcing it.



“A bird in hand is a certainty. But a bird in the bush may sing.” For the Chang family with their new-found bird-training skills, their reply to Mr. Harte’s quote might well be: why not a bird that will perch happily in your hand, but also fly into a tree to sing? Either literally or metaphorically speaking, an outdoor free-flight training course is a crucial step in cultivating independence in your target, not to mention establishing a strong bond between you and the target - regardless of your status - parent, pet owner, or even trainer in a profession. There are times when we all hope to clench everything in our hands. However, lacking air and space might ultimately suffocate the beautiful nature that initially drew us to each other. A caged bird can still sing, but its songs are definitely less intriguing than those of a free one.

Desk editor of JDO & a wildlife enthusiast*

Annie Chen

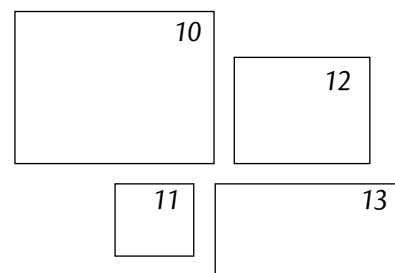
*Title bestowed by Dr. Chris Chang
 *Special thanks to the talented Jenny Chang for the exquisite illustration of Juno in flight.

6

7

8

Figs. 6-8: Compared to Juno, Bagel the blue monk parakeet, is more of a home-dweller. However, he still enjoys an occasional stroll in the neighborhood reserve on Dr. Chang’s shoulder.



Figs. 10-13: Among the birds the Chang family keeps, Juno the cockatiel knows all about free flying fun. Proud facial expressions and body language highlight his self-confidence, as well as his familiarity with the Changs. Visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_37LdxIGko to watch Juno happily in flight!