



*It's a bird's natural instinct to fly when spooked by something; before a bird realizes what's happened, they may be too far away to find their way back to you. Don't take it personally – just learn from some of our experiences on how to get them back. One of the most important things to remember is to never take your eyes off a bird when it flies away – otherwise you won't know which direction it turned.*

# Vocalization & Persistence

## THE KEYS TO RETRIEVING ESCAPED BIRDS



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My dear late friend Dale Thompson and I wrote a similar article years ago. Dale's lovely widow Katie and I want to share some of mine and Dale's past experiences. Dale's work at the Los Angeles Zoo (USA) allowed him opportunities to chase down many varieties of birds; and my 40 years of aviculture provides me the same. For instance, flamingos are unable to 'fly' without running to take off. Zoo displays are surrounded by water and trees which normally prevent them from flying off – but sometimes they do escape. Dale chased a Chilean flamingo he called "Pink Lady" down the Los Angeles River on a bicycle belonging to a neighborhood boy. Other zoo personnel shook their heads in disbelief until he caught the fully-flighted bird.

Another time 5 large Australian emus, had escaped on to a road within the zoo. These birds usually let people approach them, so Dale was able to throw flour sacks over their heads, which made them

drop down on their haunches. They were then gently 'pushed' back to their pens, guided by their tiny wings.

At Dale's house, he had a colony of blue-masked lovebirds (in a 20x12' flight) which had chewed a 1" hole through a wooden wall. All 32 lovebirds quickly escaped through this hole. Dale devised a 'trap cage' that within 2 hours recaptured 23 of the 32 lovebirds. It was simply a double cage that was partitioned in the middle. A 'bait bird' (another blue lovebird) was placed in the rear portion of the double cage, while the escapees were captured in the opposite side. The following day the remainder birds were caught.

In 1994 my birds and I spent the winter living in Santa Clarita, Ca. with Dale. In January, we were rudely awakened at 4:31am by the bed posts violently rocking back and forth. It was a major earthquake measuring 7.5 on the Richter scale (1 of 3 with that magnitude that first day). This 45-second earthquake not only had the horizontal movement common with quakes, but a vertical thrust,

an enormous amount of wind, and a horrible ROAR from the Earth.

Our poor birds were thrashed against the sides of their cages like ping pong balls; blood was splattered everywhere. A pair of his African greys who laid an average of 13 eggs per year had their cage jolted to the ground which forced their door open. Unable to locate them in the barn with a flashlight, we waited until sunrise. We spent 3 hours on foot in search for the pair. Unfortunately for grey's, they do not bond strongly with their mates which makes it almost impossible to lure them back by the mates' call. Anyway, Dale spotted a small white face on the ground that moved a little. He quickly ran toward the bird, net in the air. She was caught by her nail in a branch, and was interwoven in sagebrush. She apparently



*Panamanian trap cage.*

flew in the dark and fell to the ground in exhaustion. If he hadn't found her, a predator certainly would have later that date. Greys are most vocal in the dark (before sun-up and after sun-down); though we listened for the male we never located him.

The first week after the original quake we had over 100 tremors in the range of 4.0 to 5.5 on the Richter Scale which kept all the birds extremely nervous. I had my pet birds playing outside, trying to get their minds off the stress which occurred that week. Lemon Drop, a galerita cockatoo, had climbed up the framework of 23' high open aviary and gotten on the tile roof of Dale's home. Just as I was climbing up a ladder to retrieve her, she lost her footing and soared into the canyon. Trying to keep an eye on her to see where she landed, my focus was interrupted by one of his dogs that slipped through the gate. Concerned the dog would spook another bird; I let him inside the house and missed seeing where Lemon Drop landed.

Dale and I ran to the top of a hill to get a bird's eye view and spotted a white down feather on some brush. Convincing myself it was her feather after catching an updraft, we diligently searched for four hours to the end of the mountain range and back. Afterwards, logically thinking she should be in the vicinity, we put her cockatoo friends back outside, hoping that their calls would inspire her to answer. It was Snowball, the stud muffin of our bird world, who called out to Lemon Drop. We immediately heard a cockatoo response in the distance, which allowed us to locate her. She probably hadn't responded after her departure because of being so scared. Keep in mind, this partially clipped bird was up very high and soared down a canyon instead of flying off at a great speed.

Two of three baby Eclectus parrots escaped when their cage door was accidentally left open (we presume) after feeding. One was still on the property on the ground, and we spotted it when it vocalized later that afternoon. Knowing a baby would still be in the area because it was a wobbly flyer, we searched for the other one. Three days later, another

bird owner who lived about 3 miles away, placed an ad in the newspaper for his lost female Eclectus. 'Barry' phoned Dale the following day to relate that he had lost his bird and asked for us to keep a look out for her. Dale advised Barry that he himself had lost a male Eclectus the same week and asked him to keep an eye out for his bird. The very next day, a gentleman from an apartment complex phoned Dale and asked if he'd lost a bird. He had responded to Barry's ad and was given Dale's phone number by Barry (Barry had already found his female Eclectus). The apartment owner did not know the type of bird he had found and asked Dale to describe it. Dale described it as a young, green parrot with an orange beak with black stripes running through it. The young Eclectus had become hungry and had allowed this man to pick him up and take him inside his apartment. This gentleman, not being a bird person, had put the Eclectus in a 12x8x16" cage and offered him a saucer full of corn chips and peanuts, and a mayonnaise jar lid for a water bowl. Dale offered the man a \$100 reward, but he refused to take it and was very happy to find the owner of the bird.

One day, an unsexed pair of blue and gold macaws had unscrewed the nuts from a metal door to their cage. The whole door swung down on the one bolt that still held the door, leaving a big opening where they escaped either late at night or before 8am. Hearing a macaw vocalization in the distance, it sounded like an echo off in the hill behind the aviary. This bird had 3 primary feathers in a row missing from its right wing but was able to fly long distances, but only to a height of 10-15' in the air. The other macaw was nowhere to be seen or heard. Dale captured the exhausted bird an hour and half later on the hillside about two miles away.



*Closeup of call bird and caught bird.*



*Trigger mechanism on trap cage.*



*Trigger mechanism on trap cage.*



*Galerita in a tree by beach.*



That evening, he heard the second bird call out as it flew 300' above the house, in full feather. It roosted that night in a 75' tree half a mile from his home. He set up a trap for the bird with the previously-caught macaw. The bird was placed in a 2x2x3' cage which was then placed inside a 3x4x8' cage with a trap door on the front. The cages were then strategically placed on top of an aviary with a nylon string running 150 feet to a window in the home. Dale would see the bird every morning and evening perched in the same 75' tree – its brilliant orange chest was as vivid as a sunset. During the daylight hours, it would fly several times over the aviary because it heard its friend calling to it. On the SEVENTH DAY Dale saw it on top of the trap cage. It was then that he knew there was a very good possibility of catching the bird; two days later, he did successfully trap it. Those two macaws were later sexed as a true pair and had many babies the time we dated.

**SO NEVER SAY NEVER – EVEN IF IT TAKES MORE THAN A WEEK.**

I had taken several juvenile finches I had raised in a planted aviary to Dale's to sell at a huge bird mart. On a tropical California winter day, I took some juvenile finches within their small cage out to bask in the sun. Just up from the breeding aviaries, I proudly told Dale how the finches were enjoying the beautiful weather when he noticed red-headed parrot finches, double-bar finches and Lady Gouldian finches flying through

the air. Yes, they certainly WERE enjoying the outdoors – too much! Eight colorful finches had escaped.

We immediately snatched up the small cage and ran the remaining finches indoors. By the time we returned with a net, the escaped birds had all flown off. They scattered in all directions; over the roof of the house and up the hillsides. Two were already being pursued by a pair of native birds who were running them out of THEIR territory. We chased a few around the canyon. They landed in some treetops in a ravine, making it impossible for us to get near them.

*A pair of blue and gold macaws had unscrewed the nuts from a metal door to their cage. The whole door swung down on the one bolt that still held the door, leaving a big opening where they escaped.*

A feral cat had gotten into the back yard and lifted the food door and it became stuck in the open position. The same principle was applied to catch the finches as was done with the macaws, only the inside cage that had the captive finches was 12x12x24". It was placed in a trap door cage measuring 2x2x6'. The cage with the captive finches was placed in the back portion of the trap cage, and a saucer of finch seed and perches were put just inside the area where the trap door would close when triggered. The cage contained other red heads, Goulds and

double-bar finches, the same species we were attempting to recapture. The double-bar finches were very vocal to each other, which increased their odds of being captured.

Within an hour and a half, we caught one double-bar finch, one parrot finch and a female Gouldian. Another Gould, a male, sat in a tree nearby and watched the other three birds get captured. He wasn't about to make the same mistake they had. He perched on a limb, contemplating freedom and occasionally looking down at the others. Forty-five minutes passed. He flew near the cage, then to a nearby branch and back to the top of the fence surrounding the property. Within seconds, off he went, into the same ravine the others had flown into before him. One thing we were certain would guide the remaining finches back to us the next day, was the sound of our parrots.

The following morning we saw the male Gouldian nearby. It was still pretty cool and we weren't prepared to capture any finches yet. But this little male flew in like he owned the place. We tried to net him and missed, and he flew back over the house. Realizing that he would be hungry and more likely lured by the sight of food than by his cagemates, we set food outside the trap cage. He returned 30 minutes later and immediately spotted the dish of seed. We let him eat a bit before setting the food and other finches inside the trap cage.

He stayed close by and would let us get within 6' of him. He was always surrounded by small branches so netting him wasn't possible. We were patient and allowed him the time to find the front of the cage again. He could see the other caged finches eating, and he kept flying on the sides, top and back of the cage where they were. The entire process of capturing this little guy took 22 hours. The longer a bird is loose, the more leery they become of becoming captured. This time, both the vocalization of the birds and the food were a draw.

Meanwhile on this same morning at the breeding aviaries, two red-headed parrot finches were spotted inside the cage of the previously mentioned blue-and-gold macaw pair. The macaws

had apparently removed a single wire strand of their cage and chewed a 2" hole in the wooden side of the barn that was just outside the back end of their cage. The finches had entered through this hole, directly into the blue and gold macaws 11' suspended cage. They spent the night there and helped themselves to the blue and gold's food and water. When captured, the red-headed parrot finches and the male Gouldian finch, having both spent the night out in the 45-degree cold weather, were placed in the warm bird nursery for a few days as a precaution.

We unfortunately never saw two of the escaped red-headed parrot finches. The parrot finches, out of the eight species we had at the time, seemed to be more flighty. However, without our persistence and determination, the six finches that we did catch would probably have died, as well as other birds previously mentioned.

A bird that's been loose for a while and is familiar with the outside environment has strengthened its pectoral muscles and can fly longer distances, making it more difficult to capture. Birds that have heavy bodies, short wings and tails are somewhat easier to catch than are long-tailed, streamlined, swift-flying birds. In other words, Amazons and Aratinga conures are easier to catch than a rosella or parakeet.

Cockatiels and parakeets seem to be the most frequently reported 'lost' birds. Often, they've escaped because their owner walked outside with them on their shoulder, believing their baby would NEVER leave their side; or they are insufficiently clipped. After a couple days of not eating, tame birds generally will 'find' an animal loving human working outdoors and fly into a garage or land near them, or will follow wild birds to a feeder.

An easy way to catch a recently escaped parrot is with water. If the bird is low enough in a tree to spray water above it with a garden hose and the water falls on it (as if it were getting rained on), soak it thoroughly for several minutes. **DO NOT ATTEMPT THIS ON EXTREMELY COLD DAYS.** If the bird flies out of the tree and its feathers are heavy

with water, it probably will not be able to fly very far, allowing you to capture it. Parrots have very strong keelbones and unless they land on a sharp protruding object, they should not become injured from a fall.

Cockatoos' and greys' preen glands produce oil and their feathers produce powder making this method unsuccessful for them as their feathers will not absorb water. They will seldom remain close to an aviary or their mates (they are polygamous) and will keep flying until they are out of sight. However I do have some successful cockatoo rescues to share with you.

Snowball, a Moluccan cockatoo and I, used to ride a bicycle together with him on my shoulder. Running over a manhole cover with both tires scared him so much he grabbed on to a low-hanging oak branch. A family was saying their 'Father's Day goodbyes' so I quickly ran up to them pleading "Please – please – do you have a long ladder? My bird is up in your tree by the road". One of them said "A bird? Up a tree?" as they all gazed forward. "YES! Yes. Please hurry – he's climbing higher" I exclaimed. The guy brought out an extension ladder and as he opened it up the noise and sight of it spooked Snowball causing him to fly off. After an 8-hour pertinacious chase through a neighbourhood garden plot, several back yards, and up the neighbours' trees, we got Snowball my 40-year Moluccan cockatoo back. This partially clipped, wild-caught, but loving bird had landed in a tree small enough which enabled me to climb up a ladder

and encourage him to meet me halfway. These birds fly well late at night in the moonlight, so stay with them! Today I lift up all of the cockatoo wings and trim their primary flight feathers.



When you find a lost bird, locate the 'lost and found' column of your newspaper to see if the birds owner have advertised for its return. Most papers let you advertise a found bird free. Do not list the colors, species or whether the bird is wearing a band; instead, have the individual describe the bird so you are certain people wanting a free bird won't call and insist the bird is theirs.

You should also call animal control, rehabilitation centers, humane animal organizations, the avian department of your zoo, local police and fire departments. People who have found a lost bird are more likely to call these places than to think to look in the paper. Remember, an African grey could be mistaken for a red tailed pigeon. Flyers with your bird's picture in stores and around your neighborhood are very helpful. Offer a reward – it would be well worth it. **PSOA**

