



International Association of  
Avian Trainers and Educators

## **POSITION STATEMENT**

### **FOOD MANAGEMENT AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT**

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## BACKGROUND

Animals perform a variety of behaviors during their pursuit of food resources. Food is a primary reinforcer of behavior for animals, whether captive or wild, and can be an essential tool for shaping the behavior of captive animals. The most ethical form of animal training involves the use of positive reinforcement, with food as one important reinforcer, to achieve training goals. Positive reinforcement training can also provide opportunities for captive animals to use their senses and adaptations, similar to their wild counterparts, to obtain food. It empowers them to make decisions and experience the consequences of their actions. The presentation of food as a positive reinforcer often involves manipulating the method and amount of food presented. Two strategies that trainers often use to create motivation for food reinforcers are called Food Management and Weight Management.

### *Food Management*

Food reinforcers are often used to increase motivation to present a desired behavior when training birds. Managing when and how food is delivered, what food items are offered, and the ratio of food items offered can create desire to present behaviors for food reinforcers. This practice is referred to as “food management.”

### *Weight Management*

Because the weight and appetite of an animal are valuable indicators of its general health, monitoring a bird’s weight can be a valuable tool in understanding its motivation to present a desired behavior as it relates to various weight ranges. Once a weight range that corresponds to acceptable behavioral responses to food is established, a diet is prepared to maintain the bird in that weight range. The weight range may be adjusted depending on response during training sessions. Various conditions may influence behavior, such as weather, age, food items, etc., and should be taken into consideration when evaluating weights and diets. These weight ranges may also vary between individuals of the same species. The goal is to maintain the highest weight possible and provide the greatest amount of food while maintaining the desired behavioral response. This practice is referred to as “weight management.”

## POSITION

IAATE recognizes there are a wide variety of practices used to manage birds that participate in education programs.

IAATE supports both food management and weight management practices that are safe for the birds and trainers, provide for the health and welfare of the birds, and facilitate training. When applied properly, creating a desire for food reinforcers can be an important element in achieving these goals.

IAATE recommends against any management strategies that involve reducing food offered to the point of compromising the health of a bird. IAATE also cautions against excessive feeding that results in obesity.

## IAATE SUPPORTS, ENCOURAGES AND PROMOTES:

- Employing training practices other than weight reduction that result in desired responses, such as food management, reducing environmental distractions, and creating positive relationships between birds and trainers.
- Using a wide variety of food reinforcers that are preferred by the bird.
- Timing training sessions to coincide with when a bird is most receptive to food reinforcers.
- The development of trainers' observation skills associated with reading a bird's body language to determine its level of motivation for food reinforcers.
- The use of secondary, or learned, reinforcers such as tactile contact, verbal praise, or enrichment items, in addition to primary reinforcers such as food.
- An annual exam to determine a bird's physical health before it is put into a weight management training program.
- Determining the healthy ad lib weight of a bird before it is put into a weight management training program.
  - Ad lib (ad libitum) weight is defined as the free-feeding weight of an animal as opposed to the weight after a restricted diet. In nutritional studies this phrase denotes providing an animal free access to food and water thereby allowing the animal to self-regulate intake according to its biological needs. However, it has been observed that some species or individuals may become obese when given free food and this should be taken into account when assessing a healthy ad lib weight.
- Weighing a bird to determine ranges at which it shows desired behavioral responses.
- Maintaining daily records of a bird's food and weight when weight management is being employed for training purposes.
- Working a bird at a weight that is as close to its healthy ad lib weight as possible.
- Continually evaluating behavior and training strategies with the goal of increasing a bird's weight whenever possible.
- Completely reevaluating the training process before ever dropping a bird below 10% of its healthy ad lib weight. This reevaluation should include asking:
  - Is this the right bird for the job?
  - Is this the right trainer for the job?
  - Is the training strategy working or should it be changed?
  - Is the trainer's relationship with the bird as strong as it can be?
  - Has the trainer done everything possible to set the bird up to succeed?
  - Has the environment been arranged to eliminate distractions?
  - Has the trainer maximized the use of positive reinforcement and minimized the use of coercion and aversive stimuli?

## SUPPORT FOR POSITION STATEMENT

Using food management and/or weight management can facilitate training in the following ways:

*Primary reinforcers can give trainers a starting point for training*

Using food in training can reinforce behavior when conditions may not support the use of secondary reinforcers. For example, a bird that has no positive reinforcement history with a trainer may not find attention or tactile stimuli reinforcing. In this situation, food management and/or weight management can have a significant influence on behavior. This allows the bird to associate positive reinforcers with the presence of the trainer, strengthening the relationship between the bird and the trainer.

*The use of coercive training strategies can be minimized*

Using food management and/or weight management creates a learning environment in which birds want to participate, thus minimizing the need to use coercion. For example, rather than a trainer chasing and capturing a bird in its enclosure, a bird can be trained with food reinforcers to voluntarily approach a trainer.

*Birds potentially eat a more balanced diet*

By offering a bird different food reinforcers during training sessions, trainers are better able to ensure that the bird consumes all elements of the prescribed diet. When food is offered freely a bird may selectively consume its preferred foods over less preferred, possibly healthier, food items. Food management and weight management practices may increase motivation to eat the less preferred food items.

**MISUSING FOOD MANAGEMENT AND WEIGHT MANAGEMENT MAY HAVE THE FOLLOWING DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS:**

*The health of the bird is compromised*

When using food management, excessive use of preferred food reinforcers may reduce consumption of a balanced diet, which may lead to compromised health. The combination of food reinforcers should satisfy the nutritional needs of the bird. Food management strategies that do not take into consideration the physiological needs of the bird can lead to health issues. For example, species that feed throughout the day may require their diet to be broken down and distributed into more frequent, smaller feedings to maintain optimum health.

When using weight management, excessive reduction in weight may lead to illness, and/or death. For example, anemia may be brought about by imposing a fixed body weight, which does not compensate for the body's demand for increased food while training high-energy behaviors, such as physically demanding flights. Without sufficient nutrition to allow for the muscle-building process, a bird's metabolism will draw upon muscle and blood protein from the body to get energy. In addition, if its weight is too high a bird can be susceptible to obesity-related health issues.

*There is a breakdown of behavior*

When using food management, failure to consider the relationship between feeding schedule and training sessions may result in a breakdown of behavior due to a lack of motivation for

food. For example, feeding too much of a bird's diet before a training session may decrease its motivation.

When using weight management, excessive reduction in weight may cause the bird to become too anxious and focus only on the food instead of the training process, resulting in diminished learning or increased latency. Additionally, reducing the weight too low can cause a loss of appetite, health issues, and reduction of motivation to perform behaviors. Similarly, if a bird's weight is too high it may lose motivation for food, possibly resulting in increased latency, inattentiveness, or loss of a bird due to a fly-off.

*Poor feather condition and an unnatural molt cycle*

When using food management, failure to implement a feeding schedule that is in accordance with the physiological needs of a bird may result in a bird exhibiting anxious behaviors in the presence of trainers and/or food. This may result in feather damage. For example, anxiety or excessive motivation for food may result in a bird flapping or jumping towards the trainer and hanging on enclosure bars.

When using weight management, prolonged excessive reduction in weight can interrupt or prevent the natural molt pattern or increase the likelihood of improper feather growth. Birds that work at or near their ad lib weights will usually have molt patterns and cycles that are similar to their wild counterparts. Misuse of weight management can also cause feather damage due to excessive motivation for food that may result in a bird flapping or jumping towards the trainer and hanging on enclosure bars.

*Presentation of aggressive and/or other undesirable behaviors*

When using food management, failure to consider the relationship between feeding schedule and training sessions may result in undesirable behavior. For example, withholding food for an extended period of time may result in anxiety and/or excessive motivation for food.

Similarly, when using weight management, a weight that is either too high or too low may cause a bird to present undesirable and/or aggressive behaviors towards a trainer, other people, or other birds. If a bird's weight is too low it may exhibit undesirable behaviors related to anxiety and/or excessive motivation for food. Alternatively, if a bird's weight is too high, it may present undesirable behaviors, like fear responses to routine environmental stimuli, increased latency, or aggressive behavior such as territorial defense.

## REFERENCES:

Redig, Patrick T. (1993) Medical Management of Birds of Prey *The Raptor Center at the University of Minnesota*