

Strong Foundations and Adjustments – Keys to Training Success

Author: Sid Price – Owner/Founder Avian Ambassadors

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Introduction

This paper examines the training of a pied crow (*Corvus albus*) as a cast member in the traveling shows presented by Avian Ambassadors. It will focus not only on the basic training of the bird but also on changes made to the show segment in response to a problem that developed during the show season.

Traveling shows present a particular challenge when working with a species like a pied crow as the nature of this species is to be nervous of new elements in their environment and especially new environments. When a show travels almost every show is in a completely new location.

The subject

The bird that is the subject of this paper was acquired from the World Bird Sanctuary (WBS) in the fall of 2003. Although born in the spring of that year there were several delays that meant he could not be delivered until then. He was hand raised at WBS and spent his waiting time in the propagation department office. As a result he was a very social bird upon arrival at Avian Ambassadors. He is named Kumbi.

Basic Training

Before beginning any training for shows segments there are a number of foundation behaviors that are needed. Also the primary trainer needs to establish a good relationship with the bird. During the winter of 2003-2004 Kumbi was worked several times a day in his mews. Working in this context meant playing with him and the toys he had been given. These toys were baby teething rings and other “toddler” style toys. Also, he was encouraged to step onto the hand and receive a small reward for doing so, step back to the perch and get rewarded again. During this initial “play” period the bridge “good” was also being established.

At this time in Kumbi’s training he was fitted with anklets and jesses, which up to this point was standard practice. However this restraint was not something that corvids appear to accept in the manner that many raptors do. The nature of the species is that they are in

almost constant motion; always having somewhere to go, something to see. The jesses being held by the trainer quickly become a source of irritation for these birds. This irritation often manifests itself in pecking of the trainer's hands and fingers and it undermines the relationship between the trainer and bird. If the trainer continues to hold on to the jesses the bird escalates the pecking; however releasing the jesses may reinforce the pecking behavior. The equipment becomes a lose-lose option for the trainer. Given this situation and the strong encouragement of other trainers in the industry the decision was taken to remove the jesses from Kumbi.

This decision to remove the jesses presents an interesting question, and that is "how does a trainer keep a crow on the hand without restraint?" Once again looking to the nature of the crow provides some insight. As mentioned previously corvids are very active birds. It seems that asking them to stay on the hand for more than a short period of time is asking them to behave in a way that is not natural. They are extremely curious birds that appear to need to be busy doing something most of the time. This natural behavior suggested that when the Kumbi was on stage he should be kept engaged with the trainer as much as possible and to accept that the bird will stray from the trainer from time to time. If Kumbi was to be given this level of freedom it became apparent that having a strong recall behavior was going to be essential.

Training the recall

Initially Kumbi was worked several times a day in his mews. He would be cued from a perch to the hand, reinforced, cued back onto the perch, and reinforced again. He quickly learned the routine and the distance of the recall and the send could be increased. As the distance was increased the reinforcement was also varied to build a stronger behavior. Also, in addition to the hand cue for Kumbi to come to the trainer his name was used as a verbal cue. In a show situation if a bird is startled and flies off the hand they may land out of sight of the trainer. Under these circumstances having an audible cue for the bird can be invaluable.

Once Kumbi was recalling in his mews without hesitation he was moved out into the enclosed breezeway along side the mews to get some longer flights and also to enable the recall to be done with the trainer out of sight. Initially Kumbi was a little slow to respond in the breezeway, being a corvid the change of environment was causing distraction and a little confusion about what was expected. The recall distance was reduced until he responded without hesitation and then increased until he was responding over the full length of the breezeway.

The next step was for the trainer to send Kumbi to his perch in the breezeway and then as the recall cues were given to step into the doorway of the office. By the time Kumbi landed on the trainer's hand he would have flown a right-angle out of the breezeway into the office. The first few times this was attempted Kumbi would not land on the hand. He seemed startled by the new environment of the office and once again lost focus on the trainer. Using small approximations from breezeway to office he slowly learned what

was expected and was soon recalling from the perch in the breezeway with the trainer using a verbal cue only from inside the office.

The recall behavior was repeated during every training session several times each day and in as many different locations as possible. However he was not taken outdoors until his main show behavior (recycling) was also in place and strong. This was done in order to have something for Kumbi to focus on when he was taken outside. The goal during his training was to build a set of behaviors that were strong and kept his focus on the trainer so that no matter what the environment he knew what was expected of him and that he had complete trust in the trainer.

Crate Training

In addition to the recall behavior, getting birds to crate reliably is an important and often overlooked aspect of preparing for shows. This aspect may not be so important if one presents a show in the same location, however when a show needs to be loaded and transported it takes on a new importance.

For Kumbi crate training began with a larger crate than the one he would need to be transported in for shows. Also, the door of the crate was removed for the initial training. Once he was comfortable entering the crate with the door off, the door was replaced. When he was entering on cue with the door open it was closed for increasing amounts of time. He was rewarded for standing quietly in the crate with the door closed.

Outdoors training

Once Kumbi was performing his recall, crating reliably, and performing his show behavior he was taken to a completely new indoor area to test his reaction to this complete change of environment. His reaction was the one that was expected, in that although he performed his behaviors and reentered the crate without hesitation he seemed to be in a constant state of alert. He was worked in this new area for several days and objects in the area were changed and moved around before each session.

After a few days in the, now, not so new area it was decided to take him to an open area outdoors and run through his show segment. The result was that he performed his show behaviors without hesitation and easily reentered the crate at the end of session.

Once this initial step to working outdoors was taken, training focused on maintaining the show behavior and also building upon the strong recall behavior. Kumbi was taken to new locations every session for his recall behavior. He was placed in trees and on objects around the facility and recalled to the trainer. The plan was to have him recall without hesitation regardless of the position he found himself in.

The importance of routine

Consistency is a key factor in the training of any animal. With consistency the animal learns what is expected of them and they quickly establish trust with the trainer. When one needs to travel with a show and have the birds perform in an environment that they may see for the first time when they make a stage entrance, routine becomes paramount.

For Kumbi it was felt that his whole daily experience needed to be as consistent as possible. By keeping as much of what happened each day consistent the effects of the variable environment could be minimized. Every day, regardless of having to travel for a show, he went through the same routine. He was weighed, had his telemetry fitted, and then he was transferred to his travel crate. On non-show days he was taken out to the flying area and taken through his routine. On bad weather days he was exercised indoors, however he still has his telemetry fitted and was crated for a few minutes.

Making Adjustments

During our first show season with Kumbi he performed very, very well. His consistency really did reward us for the effort put into his basic training. Then as the season progressed he began to show some hesitation when it came time to exit the stage by entering his crate. Some times it would take us several minutes to get him in and to continue the show. The audiences loved it. We adlibbed while sending him to perches on stage for a few flights and then we would try the crate again. However, for us his behavior was not what we wanted, we wanted the show to flow smoothly and having his exit unpredictable was not a help.

After some examination of what could be the cause of the problem it was decided that perhaps the behavior had been a little ignored during his training. Yes he was crated every day and that behavior was good. The consequences of him entering the crate were that he was rewarded, however once shows started he was also spending two or three hours of travel time in there. The approach we took to improving the crate behavior was firstly to make it a part of the show segment by training him to open the door to enter the crate. During this training he would enter the crate, we would close the door, and a few seconds later let him out again. This was repeated several times for each session and his entry behavior became very strong. During some sessions if we were slow to cue a behavior he would fly over to the crate, open the door, and enter. This behavior was added to the show segment and the hesitation has not returned.

An additional change to his show routine was to carry a parrot cage to shows with us and to transfer Kumbi to that cage as soon as we arrived at our location. He stays in that cage until just before show time. We try to place him so that he can see some activity, although he needs a quiet place since the cage is smaller than we would like and we do not want him startled.

With birds like pied crows routine and consistency are essential. The problem we encountered with the crate behavior demonstrates that trainers must be willing to make

adjustments as a show season progresses. Also, the foundation behaviors must be recognized, built, and maintained throughout the season as strongly, if not stronger, than specific show segment behaviors.