

With Trust — and Treats

by Laura Ellis, Media Relations Manager

It was an uncommon sight above the trees along the North Side's West Park.

A Scarlet Macaw, its crimson wings contrasting sharply against the bright sky, looped and banked steeply, coming in for a rough landing high in a tree just outside the National Aviary Rose Garden.



Red, one of the flashiest members of Wings of the World, the National Aviary's summer free-flight bird show, was practicing his aerial maneuvers, and it was clear that he was enjoying himself. Swaying on his leafy perch, he cocked his head and eyeballed his trainers standing far below.

"C'mon, Red! C'mon, Macaw!" call Cari Clements and Elizabeth Bruccoleri, trainers with Natural Encounters, Inc., the organization that produces the Aviary's outdoor shows.

There was a long pause as Red settled himself more comfortably on his branch.

"He's just getting his bearings, and trying to get used to the wind currents," explains Cari.

"Birds like to take off into the wind

because it makes it easier to stop and land. Around here, the wind constantly swirls and changes direction, and it can be challenging for macaws, especially with their long tails."

Red finally flutters down onto a tree branch positioned on the stage. He is quickly rewarded with a nut treat and a chorus of praise from Cari and Elizabeth.

As Red takes a break, another Scarlet Macaw,



Ruby, comes streaking across the garden, gliding low above what will soon be a seating area for audiences at the show. She lands smoothly on the appropriate branch on the stage, like a well-rehearsed actress hitting her mark. More treats. More praise.

"We use only positive reinforcement training techniques," says Cari. "The birds are never forced to do anything and we never put them into uncomfortable situations. They trust us."

That kind of relationship is what keeps the show birds, all

Elizabeth sends Ebony, a West African Crowned Crane, from the garden wall to the stage...



...where Cari greets her with a treat.

of which are free-flighted, from choosing to fly away when training or performing.

"They do sometimes take off for a short period, particularly if they see something that interests them, or if the wind is strong and takes them a bit off course," says Elizabeth.

When asked if she gets panicky when a bird takes an exploratory flight not part of the show's planned choreography, Elizabeth responds, "It's the coolest thing in the world to see a macaw being a macaw, stretching its wings and flying as it would in the wild. And the birds eventually do come back because they have learned that being safe with us is better than being alone."

Ruby and Red are just two of 20 birds that are featured in Wings of the World. The cast includes Dumbledore, a Eurasian Eagle Owl; Ebony, a West African Crowned Crane with a five-foot wing span; Maharra, a regal Augar Buzzard; and Sluggo, a Seriema who demonstrates for the audience his technique for killing prey.

New this year is Robin, a Hooded Vulture born at the Pittsburgh Zoo. Like the other birds in the show, Robin spends winters at the Natural Encounters ranch in Florida. When he arrived there last year at just five months of age, he was shy and skittish, preferring to keep his distance from humans. He was placed in a large flight cage with Grimm, another Hooded Vulture, and the two became excellent roommates. Following Grimm's lead, Robin eventually adjusted to staff entering and moving around the pen.

At that point, Robin was assigned a trainer who would ease him through his initial phase of learning and with whom he would establish the first strong human bond. In Robin's case, that trainer was Elizabeth.



When Robin, a Hooded Vulture, responds correctly to Cari's cue, he's rewarded with his favorite treat.

"I started by working on getting him to walk to me and take food from my hand," says Elizabeth. "After that we progressed to his walking across his perch to take the food, and then to learning to go to another perch that I would point to. Over time, the birds discover that if they respond to a cue, they receive a food reward. If they don't respond, nothing happens."

"We always take our lead from the birds during training" adds Cari. "If they're not in the mood, the training session ends. There is no pressure. The bird has the power to decide what happens that day."

One of the major milestones in Robin's training was getting used to a crate. Because the Natural Encounters birds travel to shows and workshops, it's vital that they learn to enter a crate on their own. It sounds simple, but from a bird's perspective, it's a huge test of trust.

"It's a long process," says Elizabeth. "I began by simply placing a crate in his cage. Then I gradually placed the food farther and farther inside the crate. Eventually, he progressed

to allowing me to close the door, and lift and carry the crate."

"We make sure that the birds never feel that they are locked in, and that they never see the crate as a scary thing," adds Cari. "In Robin's case, we were still working with him up to the day we left for Pittsburgh. We had to be 100 percent certain that he was comfortable."

Robin made the trip in style, and is entertaining Aviary audiences all summer, along with the other birds in the show. And while not as striking in appearance as some of the more colorful cast members, he has his own unique charm.

"Hooded vultures are one of the smallest species of vulture," explains Cari. "They have to wait their turn at a carcass until the big vultures finish up. Then the Hooded Vultures go in and pick the carcass clean. Their thin beaks are perfectly suited to getting in to bone cracks and crevices."

Robin's gaze is intense as he looks out from his holding area, and it's not hard to picture him scavenging for carrion. His "bald" head, which is actually grizzled with very tiny short feathers, makes him appear to be older and wiser than his years.

"His training is going really well, and audiences will enjoy meeting him," says Cari.

Meanwhile, back in the Rose Garden, Ruby, the macaw, is finishing her last few flight runs. As she soars toward the stage, city workers in the park fire up an industrial sized lawnmower and a rambunctious group of elementary students suddenly begins pouring out of the Aviary entrance. Ruby takes it in stride, again hitting her mark. She's already a star.

"Wings of the World" is presented at 11:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Wednesday through Sunday (weather permitting) in the Rose Garden from June 3rd until Labor Day.



Photo by Daniel V. Klein

Not all the stars have wings

Meet Penny, Perdita and Freckles, the trained rats who provide the "comic relief" during the show. The trainers use the same positive training techniques for the furry stars as the feathered ones.

