

Progressive Wing Clipping of Young Indian Ringnecks

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How do you limit the independence and increase flight safety of those zooming, jet-plane Indian Ringneck babies once they learn how to maneuver and evade?

An effective tool I use during the socialization process for young Indian Ringnecks is the use of a “progressive” clip that gradually reduces their flying ability. Once they have taken their fledgling flight, I monitor how well they learn to handle themselves—some do better, quicker than others. I want them to gain flying skills (and self confidence). Before I clip their wings, I make sure that they are flying and maneuvering well, and most importantly, *landing* well. If they do not learn how to properly land by flaring their tail and lifting their wings, then when they are clipped, they could injure themselves if startled off their perch or cage, and could break their beak or sternum.

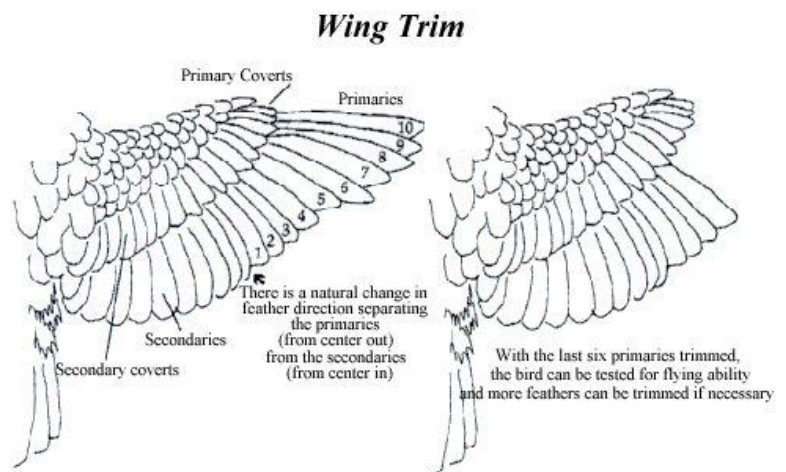


Before clipping, I check for “blood” feathers on their long flights. I want to make sure I do not cut a blood feather, which is one that is still alive, growing, and has a blood supply. It is very easy to identify, as it is still somewhat swollen and dark at the base by the body. Also, I usually want to leave a feather on either side of a blood feather uncut to protect it so it doesn't break and begin to bleed. (A bird can bleed out quickly from a broken blood feather, so if one does break, I apply pressure, some flour or corn starch, and hold it until the bleeding stops. If it does not stop, it may be necessary to pull the feather, but this should be a last resort, as this is painful to the bird and can damage the relationship and trust I have built. I have not had to pull a blood feather on a baby so far.)



I start by clipping the first two flights on each side, about 1/2” below the second tier (short) coverts. (Note: On mature birds, I cut just below the covert feathers, but babies are more apt to have blood feathers in the flights.) I let the babies adjust to this first clipping, the intention being to prevent their gaining height over a long distance (short upward “hops” are okay), but not taking away all their flight ability. After a few days, their flight muscles will strengthen, so I wonder if they’ve been clipped at all—did I miss that one? I then clip another feather on each side, and a few days later, another.

I don’t go beyond 6 feathers on each side, because I want them to be able to fly some. I also adjust this to each bird—some need only 4 cut, and some need a full 6, particularly if they are going to a companion home where it’s important that they be more dependent on their human. Because some startle more easily than others, I watch how they handle themselves—I want the right balance between them being able to fly from one landing site to another without crashing to the floor, and not being able to fly into things, like mirrors and windows. I do NOT like to take away their flight ability



totally. This is a personal bias—I feel that flight is a natural and joyous experience for them, and that they need to be able to continue it in a controlled and safe manner.

How is wing clipping tied to socialization?

Connected with wing clipping is the socialization of the young ringnecks. I start before they even take that first flight by handling and cuddling them every time I handfeed (even if only for a minute or two). By the time they are fledging, they've also started to understand the "step up" command (gently assisted by my hand on their back as I press my finger under their breast, so that they don't feel insecure). When they are moved to the weaning cages, they must step up to get out of the cage. I do NOT let them come out on their own. I also put my hand inside their cages and stroke and hold them there if there is any tendency to be flighty or territorially nippy. This is effective with most babies.



Once they can fly, maneuver, and land, they will go through an independent stage, which can include evasive maneuvers to NOT go back in their cages, and to go to the highest perch available in their environment.

That's when the wing dipping begins. Also included is reinforcement of the step-up AND cuddling. Some ringnecks are not thrilled with being cuddled once they get independent, but they must at least tolerate it if they are to come out of their cages—that is part of their socialization process. Watching their body language and how they communicate with each other helps also. Their little sounds and movements can be mimicked and reinforced as positive communication, and that helps in their trust of people. This must be done with most of them for the first few months of their lives if they are to develop into truly satisfactory companion birds. An occasional individual is just plain easy and sociable, and an occasional individual requires herculean efforts to remain sociable through the flightiness and/or nipping—but that's true with most parrots. Everyone else falls somewhere in between.

Is wing clipping necessary forever?

Depending on the "attitude" of the bird, as well as the safety of its environment, I will keep some feathers on each side clipped. If it's to be a breeder, I usually won't clip; but if it's a companion ringneck, I keep 2 to 3 feathers on each side clipped on adults. I find that adequately balances the independent attitude with the ability to fly around the room, including landing on my shoulder for a kiss and cuddle. On this latter, during hormonal times, I am careful about my face and a hormonal flare that can result in a painful facial nip! If a companion ringneck gets resistant to step-ups and returning to its cage, I just clip another feather or two, so I can retrieve it more easily. I also make returning to the cage a positive experience, with a treat or extra cuddling/kissing (if the bird really likes that).



I have to admit it's difficult to bring myself to do that clipping on an adult that has learned its way around its home environment, is unlikely to fly into a window, and loves to zoom in large circles in sheer joy of flying. BUT, there's always that freak accident, where something unexpected will startle a bird and make it fly into something so that its neck or beak is broken—and that would be heart-wrenching. And, if a visitor opened a door, the bird could be gone in a flash, and likely not retrieved. Once they get into the open with the wide blue sky and all the competing sounds and sights, they will tend to get disoriented, and it's very difficult to get them back.

So, I don't visit my dream of flying on the birds by jeopardizing their safety with totally flighted wings. I clip in a modified manner to help ensure a long, happy, and safe life for each of these special Indian Ringneck companions.