

To clip or not to clip, that is the question. Maybe not the question Shakespeare was asking, but it is the question posed by Jerry concerning his palm cockatoo Alfred.

Jerry has been taking care of Alfred for about seven months from the point of hand feeding to a now full grown bird. They are very close companions and Alfred is allowed free access to Jerry's house. He navigates by both walking around on the floor, as well as flying from room to room. It is the flying situation that concerns Jerry. It is common practice for people to have their bird's primary flight feathers clipped, in order to prevent them from flying. Jerry wonders if that is the right thing to do for Alfred. His major fear is that Alfred might inadvertently, or even on purpose, fly out an open door into the wild blue yonder never to be seen again.

Like many choices in life, clipping your bird's primary flight feathers has pros and cons. The pros are, in my opinion, less weighty than the cons. They include prevention of flight for your bird and thus the prevention of the scenario feared by Jerry. Disabling a bird's ability to fly can also make training the bird a more rewarding experience as the trainee is no longer able to escape the trainer by simply taking flight. Birds that can not fly are less likely to access areas where they are not wanted and also areas that may pose some sort of danger. Ceiling fans come to mind along with hot cooking surfaces. I am sure there are multiple other reasons one might come up with to keep a companion bird from flying. That said, I prefer to allow my birds to fly.

Flight is a natural mode of transportation for a bird. It is also an important exercise for aerobic fitness as well as the development and maintenance of good muscle tone of the flight muscles of the breast. Flight can allow a bird either to avoid danger or flee from it; think four legged companions on the prowl here. Obviously, this would not be a factor in all bird households. Birds can also be taught things to avoid in the house while flying.

Of course, every situation is unique and must be looked at as such. Birds that are not well acclimated to their caretakers, and by that I mean not handled and not spending much time out of the cage, may need to be clipped. If they were allowed to escape their enclosures, they would fly not only in an unfamiliar environment, but also while experiencing some degree of panic I suspect. This is precisely why I feel it is very important to make your bird a part of your life. Play with them and interact with them and they will not have fear when they fly in the house. This best starts when they are young; however it can still be accomplished with older birds, albeit with more effort.

Specifically referring to Alfred, I suspect he can be allowed to fly. From Jerry's description, Alfred is very bonded to Jerry. I suspect he is very secure and should do quite well flying through his house. Palm cockatoos are large birds however and can knock things over simply by the air movement created by their beating wings during flight. Addressing Jerry's main concern that Alfred might sometime fly out an open door and disappear, that would always be a potential concern of mine. I can not advise testing this theory, but I will tell you that birds that are well bonded to their human families do not generally fly away never to return.

I can share from my own personal experience an adventure that speaks to Jerry's concern. One of my birds, Tuki, was outdoors with me on my shoulder while I was working in the yard when she was suddenly spooked by the rotating blades of my windmill and flew off into a Cypress tree twenty five feet off the ground. She was obviously scared and would not leave the tree. I climbed the tree to rescue her and once near her in the tree she came right to me. My point being, she did not disappear.

Anyone with a bird companion needs to make the choice of whether or not to clip their bird's wings. I advise discussing it with your avian veterinarian and also with other people who are lucky enough to have bird companions. If indeed a decision is made to clip your bird's feathers, make sure it is done properly. Inappropriately clipped feathers can cause problems such as bleeding from the feather shafts, poking of the body wall with the cut feather ends which can lead to plucking behavior by the bird, not to mention not cutting the proper amount or proper types of feathers, which may still allow the bird to fly or worse yet, cause them to drop like a lead weight potentially causing injury.