

How to prevent turaco escapes

By Louise Peat, James Taylor and David Jones

Over the last few years there appears to have been an increase in the number of turacos and turaco species living at liberty in the UK. Clearly, as turacos are not built for long distance flying, all of these sightings will be birds which have escaped from their enclosures in the UK and usually the area they are sighted in will initially be fairly close to their original residence. As reported in Issues 46 and 47, sightings of different escaped turacos in the UK between 2016 - 2017 were into double figures and the trend looks set to continue into 2018.



A rather unusual garden view in Hawarden, North Wales. Photo credit: Stuart Gilling

Whilst it would be a pretty spectacular sight, seeing such an exotic species flitting around your back garden, long-term, the chances of turacos surviving in the wilds of the UK are remote because if not recaptured they are easy targets for predators, will struggle to find food and during the winter months will most probably die as a result of the elements.

Having said this, there have been a few instances of individual turacos surviving for a number of years.



The 'Wanstead Turaco' flying over Wanstead Flats, April 2010.

Photo credit: Jonathan Lethbridge, The Wanstead Birder @WansteadBirder

A White-cheeked Turaco *Tauraco leucotis* has been regularly sighted in Wanstead and Leytonstone, London, since October 2009 – with reports in 2017 suggesting that the bird was nest building. Whilst a few of these birds have been long-term escapees, in 2018 the society has already had two sightings reported to us where the owner has been traced and the birds returned – with both escapes due to damaged aviaries. Regardless of the result, the welfare of turacos at liberty in the UK is seriously compromised.

With ownership comes responsibility. It is the owner's responsibility to ensure the safety and welfare of any animal in their care. It is an offence to compromise the welfare and safety of any animal and that includes allowing that animal to escape.

Presumably the majority of the escaped turacos are unfortunate accidents that could not have been predicted, but it is as important to review and check aviary security on a daily basis as it is to check the birds.



The 'Wanstead Turaco' still attracts attention locally, with regular sightings reported into April 2018.
Photo credit: Jonathan Lethbridge, The Wanstead Birder @WansteadBirder

Daily checks

You should walk around your aviaries at least once daily. This should be a physical check, not just visual, pull the wire and test the struts. Over time these can get weathered and start to weaken, screws and nails can work their way loose and wood can start to rot or warp. Check the aviary floor around the perimeter for any signs of predators or vermin that may be trying to find a way in. Equally check the roof for any signs of weakness. Turacos can squeeze through quite small gaps when stressed, even the smallest weak spot in an aviary is a potential escape route. Check that any plants inside the aviary are not growing through the aviary wire. Turacos will thrive in a well planted aviary but do not allow plants to grow through the wire, as this will cause weakness and depending on the gauge of your wire, may cause breaks. It also makes it even more difficult to see in and check for any weak spots in the aviary. These daily checks should be even more thorough both before and after any extreme weather events.

Things to consider when building a new aviary

Potential turaco keepers often ask about the design of an aviary for turacos, particularly how large it needs to be, what sort of shelter they need and what sort of nesting facilities should be included, but they do not ask about aviary security and yet this must be one of the most important features about an aviary. If your turacos escape, how large the flight is, what shelter it has and what sort of nests have been provided, are all irrelevant!

Aviary construction materials can be very varied: wood, metal, stone, plastic or glass, for example, but what is important is that they are sound and strong. The construction must be sturdy enough for you to be able to climb safely onto the roof of both the shelter and the flight to carry out necessary maintenance and repairs.

Access is particularly important when shrubs and trees growing inside the flight start to grow through the aviary roof. Wind causes the branches to sway about, gradually increasing the size of the hole, until eventually a turaco can run along a branch and out through the hole.

For all FOUND entries, visit: www.cageandaviarybirds.co.uk

 **John Hayward says:** This has been the worst week ever for lost birds. Owners are not being informed when they buy their pets that they can fly. They may sit quiet and cuddly in a petshop but given the chance they will go when doors and windows are left open.

Do we need to warn new bird owners that their new animals can fly?
In 2015, after a spate of parrot escapes, John Hayward in Cage and Aviary Magazine certainly thought so.

Aviary wire ideally needs to be of a small enough aperture to exclude rodents for turaco health reasons, but such a size also has the advantage that a single break of wire does not allow a turaco to escape, whereas a single break in larger aperture wire becomes an escape risk. Some keepers have used net roofs to their aviaries to reduce risk of injury to other species of birds in the flight (e.g. waders) from flying into the roof wire and injuring themselves if panicked. Turacos do not 'burst' up from the floor into the roof in this way and the potential for weakness or holes in net roofs is far greater than in ones made of wire. Squirrels, for example, will make short work of gaining access through a net roof, leaving a potential escape route for turacos.

The material used for construction at ground level is very important. Plywood dug into the ground is simple and relatively cheap, but even well-treated wood eventually rots in damp soil and can be easily chewed through by rats. Double or triple-skinned plastic sheets are a better solution because they don't rot at ground level and are stronger than plywood. However, stone, bricks or breeze blocks are a much more secure and long-lasting solution for construction below ground up to a foot or so above the ground. A wooden or metal frame can then sit on this footing to fix the aviary wire to.



Sometimes even the best planning is not enough. Vogelpark Marlow in Germany had more than 30cm of snow fall overnight on the 1st April 2017, destroying many aviaries and resulted in the escape of Snowy Owls *Bubo scandiacus*, Bearded Vultures *Gypaetus barbatus* and White-Tailed Eagles *Haliaeetus albicilla*.
Photo credit: Vogelpark Marlow

One important design feature of any turaco aviary is a double door system. Turacos are extremely fast and quite happy to fly out over your shoulder as you enter or exit the flight. A good way to construct a double door 'safety cage' system for a range of flights is to have a door into a communal passage in the shelter. From this, doors can open into individual bird shelters and flights. Obviously, keepers need to ensure that the first outer door is firmly shut before any internal doors are opened. This system also allows for feeding station pop-holes to be built which can be accessed from the passage, so feeding can be done without even having to go into the flight and disturb the occupants.



Having a safety cage attached to the side of an aviary acts as an effective barrier to block the most obvious escape path. Photo credit: Lou Knaepen



An example of some of David's aviaries. Photo credit: David Jones

What to do in the event of an escape, short-term and long-term

- Firstly, don't panic.
 - Provided the bird is not spooked in any way, generally it will initially stay in the area. If you start chasing the bird around trying to catch it, it will panic and probably not return.
- Secure any remaining birds in the aviary - shut them in the aviary house.
- You need to investigate how the bird escaped and repair any problems.
- Once all other birds are shut away and the aviary is repaired, open up the external doors to the aviary and lay food out inside the aviary, then step back and watch.
 - If you are lucky the bird will return and enter the aviary. Let the bird settle then carefully close the doors behind it. You must be patient; this process could take hours or even days.
- Alternatively, if you are lucky enough to own a live trap, bait it with the escaped turaco's usual diet and place it in sight of the bird, preferably high up, perhaps on the aviary roof. Give your other aviary residents, particularly the partner of the escapee, access to the outside aviary. Then sit back and wait - again this process could take a few days so be patient.



A Larsen trap (designs vary) is just one example of how to recapture an escaped bird. Place a bowl of your turaco's normal diet inside and wait to see if you are successful.
Photo credit: Fourteenacre

If sightings of your escapee fade, this is the time to canvass your neighbours because such an unusual bird will not go unnoticed and if you can find out where the bird is hanging out, you can bait the area accordingly and perhaps even encourage the bird into an enclosed space such as a garage, a garden shed, or a greenhouse.

It would also be worthwhile getting in touch with any local animal shelters, or your local RSPCA officer, to give them a description of the bird along with any leg ring information and or microchip. There is a good chance that anyone spotting the bird will report it to one of these places. Of course, also let the International Turaco Society know. The society gets regular reports about escaped turaco sightings and would be only too happy to report any sightings in your area back to you.

What to do if you sight an escaped turaco

If you spot a turaco hanging around your garden, do put some food out for it, finely diced fruit, berries and vegetables. If it keeps coming back for more, try to encourage the bird into an area of the garden that is enclosed, such as a garden shed or garage. If you know of neighbours in the area who have aviaries do let them know about your visitor. Notify the International Turaco Society, local animal shelters or your local RSPCA officer. It is important for the welfare of the bird that it is recaptured and either returned to the owner or re-homed.

Consequences and the law

Every responsible aviculturist should be aware of the law in regard to the welfare of their birds. You also need to be aware that if your birds escape you are ultimately accountable; see section 14 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act below. Do your daily enclosure checks, ensure your aviaries are secure and minimise the risk of escape.

The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981

Section 14(1) of the WCA (Available to read online via: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/section/14>) makes it illegal to release or allow to escape into the wild any animal which is not ordinarily resident in Great Britain and is not a regular visitor to Great Britain in a wild state, or is listed in Schedule 9 to the Act. It is also illegal to plant or otherwise cause to grow in the wild any plant listed in Schedule 9 to the Act (available to read online via <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1981/69/schedule/9>).

The Schedule 9 list of animal and plant species has been amended by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 (Variation of Schedule 9) (England and Wales) Order 2010. Offences under section 14 carry a maximum penalty of a £5,000 fine and/or 6 months imprisonment on summary conviction (i.e. at Magistrates' Court) and an unlimited fine (i.e. whatever the court feels to be commensurate with the offence) and/or 2 years imprisonment on indictment (i.e. at Crown Court). Guidance on Section 14 of the WCA gives further information (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-the-release-into-the-wild-of-certain-plants-and-animals-guidance>).

A list of species in Schedule 9 of the WCA for England and Wales can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/preventing-the-release-into-the-wild-of-certain-plants-and-animals-guidance>).

**Do you have any other advice to prevent escapes?
We're looking to add this article to our website as the
'go to document' for all turaco owners.**

**Current turaco husbandry advice and reports can be viewed on
our website at <http://turacos.org/husbandry.html>**