

Approaching, Catching, and Holding Companion Birds

Our topics for this week are:

- **Preparations for catching and handling companion birds**
- **Holding techniques for small, medium, and large caged birds**

Companion birds need to be handled for socialization to humans, environmental enrichment, and to determine their body condition. Feathers obstruct the visual assessment of loss of muscle mass or the development of abdominal enlargement. Early detection of diseases requires palpation of the bird's body.

Before attempting to capture a caged companion bird, the room and the cage should be prepared. Light from windows should be blocked with shades or blinds to reduce the chance that if the bird escapes, it will try to fly through the glass. Heaters and fans should be turned off. Vents, windows, and doors should be closed. Bowls, toys, and other objects in the cage that are not attached to the bars should be removed from the cage.

Handlers should wash their hands before handling each bird for sanitation and to reduce odors of other birds or predators (dog and cat odors).

Handling of birds is greatly facilitated if the bird is properly socialized and handled between four weeks and three months of age. Young birds should be desensitized to handling with towels, trimming nails, and trimming of flight feathers. Mirrors in cages may reduce bonding with handlers and should be avoided. Pet birds tolerant of handling (primarily hooked bill birds) should be handled daily and allowed to exercise outside their cage. At least 10 hours of quiet sleep is important. Bad behavior, nibbling fingers, biting, or screaming should be ignored. Bird behavior is not altered by reprimands. Some may be emboldened by getting reactions from handlers by exhibiting bad behaviors.

Catching socialized companion birds is not difficult. A slow approach and offering a small food treat prior to handling can be helpful in reducing resistance. The handler should present a horizontal index finger slowly toward the bird's breast and the bird will step up on the finger. Birds will step up on a finger but usually not over or down on a finger. To ask a bird to step off of a finger, it should be presented to the perch at its breast level.

If a small bird to be captured has not been trained to step up on a finger, it must be caught barehanded from behind. It should be grasped around its neck from behind with an index finger and thumb while cupping the remaining fingers around the wings and chest. After positioning the hand for capture near a small bird, having an assistant briefly turn off the room lights to distract the bird and briefly impair its vision can facilitate the final capture.

Untamed birds in small cages may be better approached using a towel over the handler's capture hand. The bird is captured from behind with fingers around its neck and cupping the

body loosely. The towel is folded back off its head after capture. In a large cage or aviary, a net may be necessary for capture. After net capture, the bird's neck is grasped from behind and the net is carefully removed while retaining control of the bird's neck and holding the wings close to the bird's body without squeezing its chest.

Basic Equipment

Nearly all handling of birds is manual. Restraint tubes, muzzles, squeeze cages, etc. are not used with bird handling. The basic handling equipment for birds is an angular (square or rectangular) cage and towels.

Restraint of Individuals or Portions of Their Bodies

Whole Body

A bird's body is restrained by holding the wings against their body and controlling movement of the head. It is important to not impair the ability of their chests to easily expand. A handler's fingers should be separated when handling birds to reduce compression on thorax and ability to breathe. Care is also needed to avoid damage to their plumage.

Towels can be used, but looped thread cloth should be avoided because the loops can catch the bird's nails. Gloves should not be used, except for raptors (hawks and owls). Capturing the bird should be done by approaching it from behind and placing the towel over the bird's head and grasping around its body and wings. The cloth over the head is then folded back as if removing a hood from a priest. The restrained bird should be held close to the handler's body to provide a better feeling of security in the bird. Macaws may protest loudly enough that ear protection is advisable.

A bird's head is typically restrained by a hand with the palm behind the head with either an index finger and thumb, or an index finger and middle finger, positioned on each side of the neck and under the jaw restraining head movement. This is the same neck collar hold used on rodents.

Handling Variations for Different Bird Sizes and Types

Small-Sized Birds (budgerigars/parakeets, canaries, finches)

If full body restraint is needed, a towel can be placed over the handler's hand to mask the hand approaching. However, handling small or medium sized birds with towels or cloths may cause them to become overheated.

The neck is grasped between an index and middle finger or the index finger and thumb. The chest is held loosely with fingers spread apart to aid in avoiding the restriction of chest movements. The bird's feet may be allowed to grasp the handler's little finger. An alternative grip is to hold the neck between the thumb and middle finger with the index finger on the top of the head.

Medium-Sized Birds (pigeon to hawk-sized: cockatiels, cockatoos, conures, parrots)

The bird's body must be grasped with both hands, but respiration cannot be restricted. The wings and chest are held gently on both sides by two hands with fingers separated. Alternatively, the head is restrained by using the handler's thumb and index finger on the neck while holding the wing tips (distal remiges) and the legs (tibiotarsal bones). A firmer and more comfortable grip on the legs is with the thumb and middle finger around the legs and the index finger between the tibiotarsal bones.

Large-Sized Birds (Amazon, African Grey, macaw, cockatoo parrots)

Large-sized birds can be dangerous to handlers. For example, macaws can have a wingspan of up to four feet and extremely strong jaw strength to inflict severe bites.

Parrots defend themselves primarily with their beaks so their heads must be secured first. Towel restraint should be used if the bird is resistant to being handled. Gloves should not be used. Approaching slowly from the front will cause less distress in the bird. A handler wraps the towel over the head and around the wings. The neck is grasped between the thumb and fingers with the tips of the fingers beneath the lower aspect of the jaw. At the same time the bird's feet are grasped with the other hand and then the bird is held next to the handler's body. A nontoxic wooden stick can be offered for the parrot to bite as a distraction, if needed.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

- 1. Caged, companion birds should be handled early in life to socialize the bird for proper care as an adult.**
- 2. Care to prevent any compression of the bird's chest must be taken during any handling procedures.**
- 3. Parrots, especially macaws, have very strong beaks which can inflict serious bites.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, *Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling*, and *Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling* all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.