

Handling Various Companion Bird Sizes and Types

Our topics for this week are:

- Handling of different size companion birds
- Requirements to handle birds of prey
- How to release birds into cages
- Special equipment and procedures for handling companion birds

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 wing span 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.

Raptors/Birds of Prey (hawks, owls, eagles)

IMPORTANT: A State Rehabilitator's license is required to care for and rehabilitate sick or

injured wildlife, and a Federal Special Purpose Rehabilitation Permit is needed in order to care for and rehabilitate migratory birds and endangered or threatened species of wildlife such as raptors.

To keep a raptor, a handler must serve a 2-year apprenticeship, pass a written exam, build acceptable facilities, and maintain thorough records of care.

Raptors use their talons for primary defense so their feet must be secured first. A handler should never take off leather gloves with gauntlets when handling a raptor. Low lights in room for diurnal birds (hawks) and bright lights for nocturnal birds (owls) can create an environment more conducive for quiet handling.

Permanently captive raptors usually have jesses (leather straps attached to grommets in leather anklets with around the legs) for easier leg restraint. If the handler approaches from behind, the wings, body, and legs are grasped together, and if the handler approaches from the front, the legs are grasped first. Appropriately thick leather gloves should be used. One gloved hand should be kept between the bird and the handler's face as protection and a distraction while the bird's feet are grasped with the other hand by placing an index finger between the feet. Raptors will occasionally bate, i.e., attempt to escape, flip over, and hang by the jesses.

Releasing in a Cage

A bird should be returned to its cage after removing all toys, perches, bowls, and other cage materials. It is then placed on the cage floor and the door is closed against the handler's arm that restrained the bird. The arm should be carefully withdrawn while keeping the door closed on it until the door can be latched. Then, while opening the door a minimal degree, cage materials are returned to the cage as quietly as possible.

SPECIAL EQUIPMENT AND PROCEDURES

Special handling equipment or procedures for birds can include gloves and gauntlets, bags, tubing, lighting, harnesses, and leg and beak bindings.

Bags

Bags for restraint of birds can include stockings, pillowcases, and other cloth bags.

Cardboard Tubing

Toilet paper or paper hand towel cardboard tubes can be placed around appropriate-sized birds for temporary restraint. The purpose is to impair movement of the wings and legs but not compress the breathing movements of the thorax.

Lighting

Diurnal birds are quieter if deprived of bright lighting. Diurnal birds of prey (falcons, hawks, eagles) are kept quieter by the use of hoods. Nocturnal birds (owls) are quieter in bright lighting.

Harnesses

Bird harnesses are used with a leash for exercising birds. A harness has a loop that goes over the bird's head and is connected to a loop that goes around their body behind the wings.

Beak Binding

Beak binding can aid in the restraint of straight beaked birds. Toucans and other large, pointy beaked birds can be aggressive with their beaks. While wearing a face shield and leather gloves, the handler should grasp the bird's bill. The bill is then taped shut or bound with elastic bands. In addition, a large cork or a tennis ball with a slit cut in it should be pushed on the point of beak.

Restraints for Raptors

Hood

Hawks are diurnal hunters than depend on their vision. Hooding them quiets their activity, reduces their startle reactions, and allows them to be carried without exciting them.

Gloves and Gauntlets

Gloves and gauntlets are made of leather, and typically used for handling raptors. Gauntlets are heavy gloves that extend beyond the wrist and protect the forearm.

Leg Bindings

Jesse (pronounced "jess"; last "e" is silent) are leather straps about 8 to 9 inches long that are strapped to each leg. A leash is a leather strap about three feet long that can be attached to the jesses. Bewits (bee WITS) are leather strips that tie bells to the feet of raptors. A creance (kree ANTS) is a long light weight line that is tied to the perch on one end and the jesses on the other for teaching a raptor to fly from the perch to the handler's gloved fist.

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

- Different size companion birds need different handling techniques
- State and Federal permits are required to care for and rehabilitate raptors
- The appropriate lighting should be used in handling rooms for the species of bird being handled.

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint* published by CRC Press. It is also available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

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.