

Approaching, Catching, and Handling Companion Birds

Our topics for this week are:

- How to approach and catch birds
- Routine handling of companion birds

APPROACHING AND CATCHING

Companion birds need to be handled for socialization to humans, environmental enrichment, and to determine its 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 bird's neck and holding the wings close to the

bird's body without squeezing its chest.

HANDLING FOR ROUTINE CARE AND MANAGEMENT

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.

Commercial avian straight jackets are available that fold over the wings and wrap around the body with a velcro closure. The bird requires little to no further restraint after the wrap is applied. However, commercial jackets require two handlers for birds that resist restraint and are applied more slowly than towel wraps.

Head

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.

Wings

The escape of companion birds by flying out opened doors and windows can be reduced by trimming 1/2 to 1/3 of the ends of their primary flight feathers, which are approximately four to 10 feathers on each wing. Trimming is not pinioning. Pinioning is an amputation of the wing at the carpal joint. Trimming is performed by extending a wing and clipping the ends of the feathers with sharp, unsprung scissors. Birds that have not been trained when young to accept restraint and wing extension may need to be wrapped in a towel by an assistant and to have a wing extended. Clipping flight feathers can also eliminate or reduce the risk of flying into glass of windows, onto hot cooking ranges, or the blades of fans. Aggressive birds may need to be clipped to protect owners, handlers, or other animals. Wing clipping should not be performed until fledglings learn to fly to prevent behavioral disorders associated with a lack of confidence.

Although wing clipping can be a safety precaution, it can render the bird more vulnerable

to other dangers such as being stepped on or injured by other pets. Mild wing clipping or strong wind currents in the outdoors can enable many birds to still fly, but their ability to control a landing may be impaired and result in injury. Clipping of wings should be bilaterally symmetrical or the bird will be imbalanced when attempting to fly and may injure itself. Clipping so closely that any ability to fly is lost can cause injury to the sternum (broken keel bone) if it attempts to fly or falls from an elevated position. Wing clipping should be done in increments to allow the bird to adapt to the inability to fly and different coordination needed to maintain balance. It should never be severe enough to prevent the bird's ability to glide to the floor. The regrowth of feathers should be checked six to eight weeks after a trim to determine if re-trimming is due.

During molting season, new growing feathers have an abundant blood supply and are referred to as blood feathers. Blood feathers should not be trimmed or significant blood loss may result.

Mouth

Birds that are not given sufficient opportunities to grind down the growth of their beak, require trimming of the beak. Use of cuttlebones, concrete perches, or other abrasives in the cage usually eliminates the need to trim beaks.

A hand-held rotary grinder is often used to achieve a normal shaped beak. The noise of the running grinder should be introduced at a distance to the bird and based on signs that the bird becomes desensitized to the noise, the grinder is moved closer until it can be used briefly on the beak. With repeated brief use, the duration of use can be increased. Alternatively, an emery board may be used.

The mouth is not specifically restrained. The bird's head is restrained while the beak is trimmed.

Legs

Toenails can also overgrow if normal opportunities for abrasion of the toenails do not exist. Providing one cement perch in addition to wooden perches will usually eliminate the need to trim nails. Training for toenail trimming should begin when birds are in their socialization period. Only the tip of the toenail should be clipped or ground down.

Restraint of a leg during toenail trims is done by grasping and extending the leg while the body is held with a neck collar hold and fingers cupped around the wings and chest. Larger birds are held by an assistant while the person trimming the nails extends and holds the leg with the toenails to be trimmed. Depending on the size of the bird, toenails may be trimmed with human nail clippers, dog nail trimmers, or hand-held rotary grinders. The same restraint is used to apply identification leg bands, but embedding a microchip into the left pectoral muscle of the bird is preferred by most handlers for identification.

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

- Early socialization of birds is required to achieve good handling later in life
- Handling of companion birds other than raptors should be with bare hands or towels
- Clipping of wings should be done in increments

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.