

## **Capture and Restraint of Pet Birds**

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The time may arise when you need to restrain your bird for grooming, medicating or examination. This discussion provides tips on how to handle and restrain pet birds.

Free movement of the sternum is essential for respiration in birds. They possess no diaphragm and their lungs do not expand and contract. They breathe through expansion and contraction of their air sacs facilitated by their intercostal muscles. Thus, any undue pressure on their sternum would restrict breathing. We have all heard of instances where a bird has died in someone's hand. More than likely they had closed their hand around the chest inhibiting respiration. When handling a bird, fingers should never be closed around the chest, rather cupped in the hand to allow for sternal movement.

During handling carefully monitor the bird for any signs of discomfort, stress or breathing difficulty. Due to struggling, the bird could contort and twist in such a way to constrict the air passages. Also during restraint, efforts to escape can lead to hyperthermia, especially if in a towel, so be alert if the bird begins to pant heavily. It might be advisable if the bird is in extreme discomfort to release the bird and allow it to return to normal breathing before continuing, particularly as the bird may be compromised by a disease condition anyway.

The amount of restraint required varies with each individual bird. Hand-raised baby birds need minimal restraint while wild-caught untamed birds may require an assistant (or two!). A word of caution when handling hand-raised birds; quite often these birds have been fed shortly before the exam so their crop may be partially full. Take care not to put pressure on the crop as the food material could back up the esophagus and lead to aspiration. The esophagus passes on the right side of the neck so a small amount of pressure in this area with the left thumb (if the head is held with the left hand) while restraining the bird will prevent backflow. This would also apply to any bird that has fluid in the crop. Get in the habit of evaluating the crop for the presence of fluid so episodes of aspiration can be prevented.

Overzealous restraint of a bird could lead to fracture or dislocation of a limb. White-faced birds such as macaws or African Greys, experiencing excessive pressure on the sides of their face to facilitate immobilization of the head could develop bruises on their skin. These are harmless and will quickly resolve.

Small birds can be captured and restrained bare-handed, however, protection is required for larger birds. Cloth or paper towels are preferable as they expedite both capture and restraint. Hands are hidden behind the towel so the bird cannot get a direct line on fingers and also the towel can be draped over the bird during capture so that the wings are protected. Another advantage to the towel is that the bird does not see the hands during capture so that it will not become hand shy; it may become towel shy however. Proper restraint in a towel will enable one person to complete an exam in all but the large parrots, whereby an assistant is required. A source of clean towels must be available. If an adequate supply is not available the receptionist should request that the client bring an appropriately sized towel for restraint.

Avian practitioners do not recommend the use of heavy gloves for restraint purposes. Although they may be a successful means for capture and restraint they have several disadvantages. Grabbing a bird with heavy gloves appears rough, leaving the client with a bad impression. The bird may associate the gloved hand with the bare hand, leading to the fear of hands entirely. Another consideration is that gloves are difficult to clean thoroughly. Still another disadvantage is the gloves will not protect the wings as well as the towel.

In preparation, make sure all the doors to the room are closed and secure to prevent escape. With smaller birds, as the cage door is opened make certain the area surrounding the capturing hand and arm is blocked

in some manner so that the bird cannot pass around it and out of the cage. Quite often the cage is cluttered with perches, toys and cage accessories. Removing these objects is not always necessary but may be required if capture is hindered. Darkening the room before capture can be helpful with very small birds and facilitates the procedure with less disturbance to the birds.

Nearly all birds will attempt to bite when captured. If bitten, do not squeeze the bird harder or suddenly drop the bird uttering a salty oath. Techniques to stop a bird from biting include blowing into the face of the bird, using a mouth speculum or similar device to open the beak, or just releasing the bird. Another technique is to twirl quickly in a circle (while holding the bird), which disorients the bird, causing it to release its hold. Until the capture and restraint techniques are mastered many bites will unfortunately be endured, which will contribute to the rapid development of capture and restraint skill.

### **Capture and restraint of small birds**

Budgies, finches and canaries are usually captured bare-handed. If inexperienced, a paper towel can be used to restrain these birds until comfortable to restrain them bare-handed. Basically, reach into the cage and when easily able to, grab the bird behind the head and neck. The hand should be cupped around the body while attempting to hold the head with the thumb and index finger on the sides of the temporomandibular joints. Remember not to close the hand around the chest, but do provide enough firm restraint so that the wings are unable to flutter freely. If a towel is used it can be dropped over the bird, locate the position of the head, grasp it firmly and gently enclose the body into the towel, encompassing the wings and feet, but with no undue pressure on the chest. When removing the bird from the cage remove it head first through the door for if the wings did work free there would be less likelihood for injury moving the bird in this direction.

There are five basic means of holding a birds head. 1) Extend the head between the index and middle finger, 2) Grasp the head with the thumb and index finger on either side of the head at the temporomandibular joint, 3) Using three fingers, place the thumb and middle finger just below the eyes and the index finger over the head, called the 'helmet grip,' 4) Crook the index finger behind the back of the head and gently place the thumb behind the lower mandible, 5) Gently circling the neck with the thumb and index finger as a tubular restraint collar would. With gentle pressure the head can be adequately restrained by any of these techniques. Techniques 4) and 5) are preferred methods as they are not very stressful for the bird. Practice each technique and implement the one with which they are able to achieve the best restraint. In each of these techniques, remember that the body should be held loosely and rest in the palm of the hand. If having difficulty with the restraint of the wings and feet, do not hesitate to use a towel.

### **Capture and restraint of large birds**

Lovebirds, cockatiels, conures and mynah birds may be restrained bare-handed but it is preferable to handle them with a paper towel or a small washcloth due to the fact that they can impart a painful bite. These birds can still be handled by a single person. Birds larger than these, Amazons, cockatoos, macaws, for example, may require the help of an assistant.

The capture technique is fairly simple but, of course, requires practice. An appropriately sized towel for the variety of bird is essential. Tame birds can be easily caught, some will allow the towel to be wrapped around them; others may allow the towel to be placed around them while they are standing on the exam table or on the arm of the owner. Avoid frightening the bird by suddenly capturing it from above with a towel. Long-lasting phobias can be the result. If a bird is captured off of a person be careful as the bird may clamp down with the beak or nails if frightened. Once the towel has been gently wrapped around the bird, locate the head and grasp it from behind through the towel. While holding the head with one hand, use the other to lightly wrap the towel around the body, to restrain the wings and feet. Lift the body with both hands and rest the bird in the towel on the inside of the forearm or on the exam table, which will free the other hand for manipulation and palpation during the exam. Restraint of the head can be with one of the five techniques described earlier. With large birds techniques 4) and 5) are still preferred especially since holding birds on the side of the face may cause bruising.

Untamed birds are more difficult to capture. If capture of such a bird from inside the cage is to be attempted be patient; do not create a rodeo atmosphere. What must be done is to wait for the right opportunity, which

is when the bird is facing away or climbing on the cage bars which will enable the head to be grabbed from behind. If successful, then wrap the towel around the body. If the bird is difficult to capture, then remove the perches from the cage. A bird that will not stop facing the capturer or rolls over on its back is a challenge and each handler will need to develop an individual style. Try to distract the bird so that it will turn its head, but if all else fails then use two hands holding the towel and try to scoop the bird up quickly trying to gain control of the head. Your capture technique will improve over time (out of necessity) so do not give up. Avian practitioners have suffered through their share of bites before they developed capture expertise.

Adapted from *Avian Medicine: A Practitioner's Guide 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Peter S. Sakas DVM. AAHA Press 2002.