Bird Restraint

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Before any physical examination may be performed, it is necessary to catch and restrain the patient. In many cases this is different to the manner in which other animals are handled.

Handling and restraint of avian patients should:

1. Be safe and comfortable for the patient and handler
2. Consider the behaviour of the bird
3. Consider the physical characteristics of the bird
4. Minimise stress

Be safe and comfortable for the patient and handler

When performed for the first time in the presence of an owner, catching a bird can be a daunting and nerve-wracking experience. Take all precautions to make yourself comfortable. Sit down if it helps to relax you.

Avoid the temptation to use gloves with all birds (the only exception being raptors). Gloves have no place even with large cockatoos. They reduce the sensitivity you have in feeling your patient and they are clumsy and awkward.

The preferred item for handling most aviary and pet birds is a towel. The thickness will vary with the size and biting power of the patient

In some birds the beak may be a potential cause of damage. Some people prefer to tape the beak closed to avoid this. I find this unnecessary.

Consider the behaviour of the bird

The age of the bird will determine how it may respond to capture. Young birds may not have learned to be fearful of people. Older birds may have been caught many times and be aware of means to make the task more difficult. Aged birds may be at higher risk of diseases that may compromise capture.

Breeding status may complicate the issue. Birds that are handled and incubating or feeding young may abandon the nest if captured and handled.

Health status is always a consideration. Any ill bird, particularly with respiratory disease, may be a poor candidate for capture and any handling must be kept to a minimum.

The species of the patient may be a guide to handling. Large species such as Ostrich may require a shield to protect you as you push them along a race. Aggressive species (Cockatoos, Lorikeets) may attack you and fight. Other species, e.g. quail, may panic and erupt in flight crashing into walls or the roof, often with enough impact to cause serious damage or death.

Observe the bird to determine which methods or escape or defence it is likely to use.

Consider the physical characteristics of the bird

An inspection of the bird's structures prior to attempting capture will make you aware of which structures it

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may use to defend itself e.g. Beak, wings, claws or legs.

The anatomy of birds makes capture a problem. They have air sacs and lack a diaphragm which makes them prone to problems if their sternal movements are restricted. In long necked birds, such as swans, excessive flexing of the neck or pressure may kink or collapse the trachea.

The bones of birds are fragile compared to mammals. They have thinner cortices and some of the larger bones are pneumatic.

Minimise stress

Diurnal species are best caught in dim light or darkness. For nocturnal species the opposite applies. I find it useful to draw the curtains and make the room as dark as possible. I open the door and place my hand at the entrance. Once the bird settles down , I have an assistant (often the owner) switch the light off. The bird will usually freeze and can be quickly caught. Once the light come back on, the bird is out of the cage with a minimum of fuss and this looks quite professional as well as demonstration to the client that we have the bird's interests at heart.

Before you attempt to restrain a bird have all your equipment prepared for any tests you suspect you may need. This ensures that the bird is restrained for the minimum time possible.

To minimise any injuries, remove perches and other toys from the cage before you start the capture process.

Make certain all doors and windows are closed prior to beginning the process.

Capture Technique

Approach the bird from behind. This is not as important of you intend to simply throw a towel over the bird.

Aim to grasp the head and dorsal surface of the body, including wings, and gently press the bird onto the wall or floor.

If a towel is used, gently remove the whole bundle from the cage usually with pressure only maintained around the head and neck.

Once the bird is removed from the cage adjust your grip and restrain the feet if necessary. The towel may be kept around the bird or removed as the situation indicates.

Release

This should occur as soon as possible. Birds should not be restrained for long periods. Turn the bird to the correct orientation. I like to release them onto the ground so that they can adjust to new bearings and are less likely to panic or flutter. For large and aggressive species I give them a gentle push so that they don't turn around and attack.

Above all do not release birds in mid-air. This is dangerous and stressful for the patient.

Holding the Patient

The grip you use is often a matter of personal preference. Despite the grip used, the position of the fingers is of utmost importance. As birds lack a diaphragm, they use movement of the sternum to move air through their air sacs and lungs. If you encircle the bird's body with your fingers you will interfere with the bird's breathing movements and cause asphyxiation. Many birds have died simply from incorrect handling.

Parrots. I find that if the head is correctly held with the correct amount of tension and the neck is stretched and extended, most birds will lie quietly. For small to medium sized birds, my preference is for the three-finger

hold (see Figure 1). This triangulation of fingers hold the head still and does not put pressure on the sternum. For large parrots I use a grip with the heel of the thumb on one side and all my fingers on the other side (see Figure 2). The remainder of the parrot is covered by a towel or by my other hand gripping the wing tips, tail and feet.

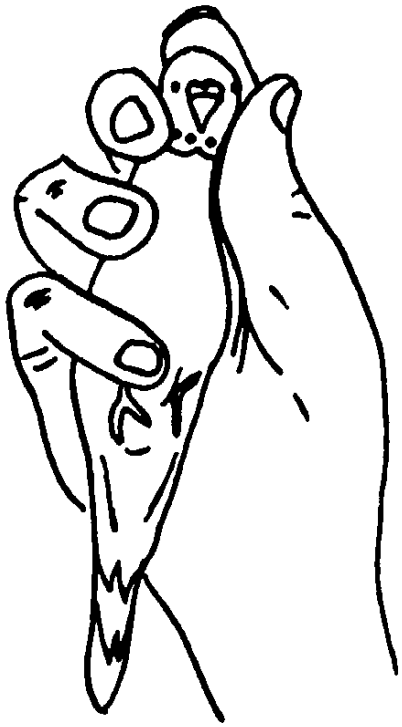


Figure 1: Three-finger hold on Budgerigar

An alternative grip is used by some practitioners. Termed the "Universal" grip, it can be used for all parrots from Budgerigars to large cockatoos. The thumb is inserted between the ventral aspect of the two mandibles, the index finger encircles the caudal aspect of the neck and places a downward pressure on both of the wings, allowing the neck to be extended. This requires more skill to master but can be a very useful technique.

Passerines. Canaries and finches can be restrained by the three-finger method above or simply held with their neck between the index and second finger and the other fingers lightly enclose the wings and feet.

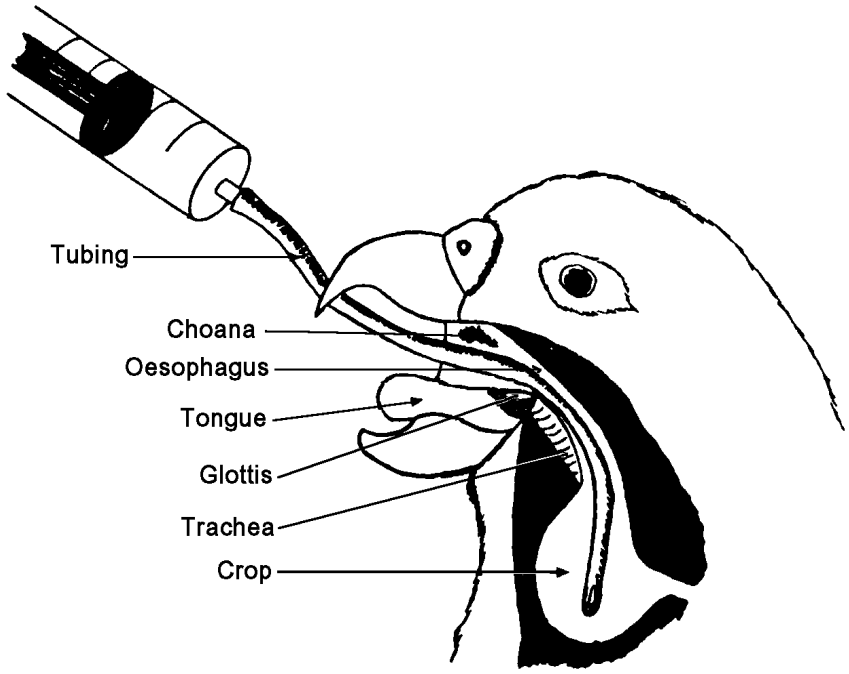
Pigeons are held in the palm, facing towards you. The feet are held between the index and second finger while the tail and wing tips are encircled by the thumb.

Figure 2: Thumb-and-fingers hold on a cockatoo

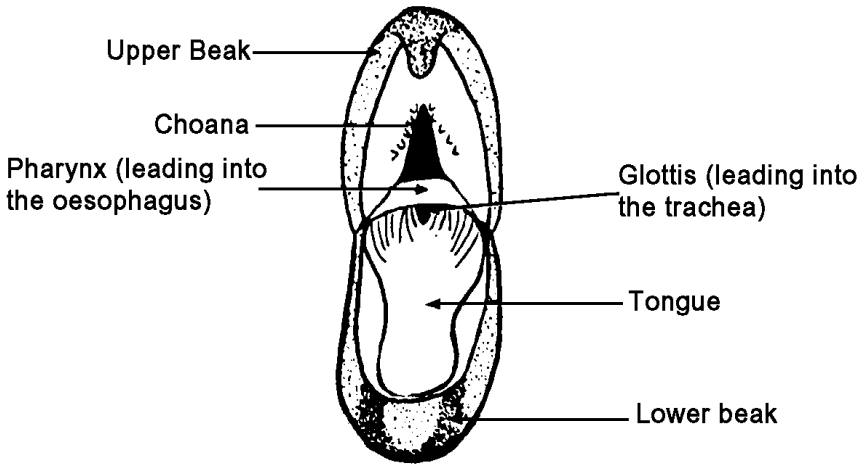
Gallinaceous birds are held with the head between my chest wall and upper arm the feet are held by one hand with the index finger separating them. In this position the vent is facing away from you and no nasty deposits end up in your pocket.

Raptors are handled with gloves. They may be restrained with hood, jesses, swivels and leashes as commonly used for falconry. Alternately they may be held in one or two hands with the wing tips and tail encircled and the feet separated by the fingers.

Wild Birds. A modification of the above techniques may be selected depending on the bird's size and shape.



A: Tube feeding a bird



B: Simplified view of major structures of a bird's mouth

Figure 3: Use of a crop tube