

Extended Abstract

Field Stabilization and Transport of Oiled Birds

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From the moment an oiled bird is captured to the time it reaches a rehabilitation facility its rescuers have the opportunity to increase its chances of survival through proper handling, appropriate housing, and by providing first aid and stabilization. The following are suggestions that may help birds survive the arduous ordeal of capture and transport.

Transport of oiled wildlife can be broken down into two phases. Typically, the animal is transported from the capture location to a 'stabilization site' and then, on from there, to a rehabilitation facility. The initial phase, the collection of oiled birds, often takes place in remote areas, far from cages and supplies. It is important to plan for the species to be encountered and have the appropriate 'temporary field containers' available. When the animal reaches a stabilization site, be it a vehicle, a trailer, or warehouse, it should then be transferred to more suitable confines as needed.

In the field, lightweight pillowcases can be used to hold a single small to medium-sized bird - the deeper the sock, the better. The open end of the pillowcase is tied in a knot, leaving enough room for the bird to move. The bundle may be carried at waist-level and held so that the bird does not flap excessively, or secured in a backpack or container, making sure the bird is upright and has ample ventilation. The fabric must be kept relatively dry.

Large mesh or fabric sacks, like dive bags or laundry hampers, can be used to secure larger birds for transfer from the field to a vehicle. Rescuers should brace the animal as needed to prevent it from injuring itself or a person.

For quick transport out of the field, large sheets can also be used to temporarily 'wrap' birds, like swans. The fabric is wrapped around the birds' body, securing the wings but leaving the head, and sometimes its legs and feet, free. Heavy-duty tape is used to secure the ends. There are canvas bags specifically designed for this purpose.

When selecting temporary housing, as a rule, animals should be able to maintain normal body posture with enough room to turn around without hitting the walls. The material selected will depend on the species and the situation. Wild birds should not be exposed to wire as they can easily damage their feathers and bills.

Plastic 'airline kennels' come in many sizes and provide ample airflow. Unfortunately, their metal-grated openings can pose a hazard to some birds. They should not be used to house loons and grebes. To reduce injuries the openings may be covered over, from the inside,

with shade cloth. At the very least, a pillowcase or sheet should be draped on the inside of the grated doorway to prevent aggressive birds from damaging their bills on the bars. Towels should be placed on the floor of the crate to provide traction, cushioning, and to absorb excrement. While these containers are often ideal, in the field they can be too cumbersome to carry. They are useful on boats or when other modes of transport like ATVs are available.

Collapsible cardboard and plastic 'pet carriers' provide excellent ventilation through their pre-cut air holes. The plastic or waxed boxes are preferred as they remain sturdy in wet conditions, and the plastic ones can be cleaned and reused. Towels or rags should be placed on the floor of the carriers to keep the animal from slipping. In the field, even these foldable containers may prove unmanageable for rescuers already saddled with nets and gear.

To utilize cardboard boxes, they must first be modified to allow for good ventilation. International Bird Rescue recommends a minimum of 8 air holes on each side of the box to allow for sufficient airflow. The holes should be approximately 2.5 cm (1") in diameter. Because cardboard boxes can fall apart easily, they are typically used as a last resort. However, deep, rectangular boxes can make excellent housing for loons and grebes, allowing handlers to access the birds more safely from above.

Diving birds, like loons, grebes, auks, and sea ducks, require special care. Their bodies are suited for life on the water. They quickly develop 'keel sores' and leg problems when out of the water and on hard surfaces. In 1988, International Bird Rescue developed the net-bottom cage. The flexible fabric bottom distributes the birds' weight away from the keel, delaying the onset of these ailments. The netting also helps prevent feather rot by allowing excrement to fall through, away from the bird's body. In the absence of net-bottom caging, plush, uneven padding may be provided.

While net-bottom caging delays the onset of keel lesions, another invention by International Bird Rescue in 1995 went further in preventing them. Fashioned after pressure relief cushions, the U-shaped keel 'donut' takes pressure off the keel entirely. It also reduces the onset of hock joint ailments brought on when a bird's legs are fixed in a hyperflexed state. Use of this tool is normally restricted to the rehabilitation setting as it is labor intensive and requires skill to apply without harming the animal.

Another one of International Bird Rescue's recent innovations is the use of soft-sided caging. Fabric walls can substantially reduce secondary injuries in flighty birds – the result of them crashing against hard surfaces in their attempts to escape. Constructed of tarps or canvas-like material, these modular caging tent-like systems are relatively simple to build and can be cleaned and stored for future use. More petite versions can be constructed out of PVC rather than wood framing. Net-bottoms may be added as needed.

No matter how perfect the housing, wild birds will be experiencing a tremendous amount of stress from being oiled, captured, and held captive. Every time they see or hear a human predator, or when they are handled, the birds experience the stress of being hunted and attacked. It is imperative that rescuers keep additional stressors to a minimum. During

transport, the volume of music, the radio, and conversation should be kept low. At the stabilization site, animals must be housed away from human traffic and sheets and blinds can reduce visual stressors. Ambient white noise can help drown out human activity. Disturbance and handling of the animals should be minimized. For example, when animals require feeding and cage cleaning, these two tasks would ideally be accomplished at the same time, disturbing them once then allowing them to rest.

Often, oiled birds, especially when wet, will become cold, or hypothermic. They will have stopped eating normally. Their weight will plummet and they will become severely dehydrated. To counter these conditions rescuers can provide supplemental warmth and fluids. Administering this first aid can mean life or death for some animals.

A bird's feathers act like shingles on a roof, keeping out the elements. Just a spot of oil can cause feathers to separate, allowing water and air to seep through to the skin. Simply being confined and sheltered from the elements may allow a bird to reach a more normal core body temperature of 39°C (102°F). If an animal requires additional warmth, a heated vessel of water wrapped in a lightweight towel will give off warmth for a little while. As it cools though, the water will start to draw heat away from the animal. Microwaved dry rice in a cotton pillowcase or sock will give off heat for an hour or so. If a heating pad is used, it should be placed under a section of the container or off to one side so the animal can move away from the heat source. Animals that cannot move away from the heat source should be monitored closely. In primitive situations, stones, warmed in an oven or a fire will give off heat for some time.

In warm climates or heated environments overheating, or hyperthermia, can be a concern. Shade and ventilation is the key to keeping birds cool. Birds will pant and sometimes open their wings slightly when they are too warm. If a bird is exhibiting signs of hyperthermia its feet and legs may be spritzed with cool water. In severe cases their bodies may be quickly submerged in cool water.

Providing fluids will help hydrate animals and help flush any ingested toxins. An appropriately sized French catheter and syringe is used to provide water or an electrolyte solution orally. Generally, the birds are started out on half the normally recommended amount, warmed, or at room temperature. In the field, filled syringes can be warmed using the car's defroster, or a 12-volt baby-bottle warmer. While providing fluids is extremely beneficial, it should only be performed by those who are expert in doing so.

When the time comes to transport animals, rescuers must pay attention to airflow, air exchange, and ambient temperature. Transport boxes should not be stacked right next to one another. It is recommended that at least two sides of each box be open to air flow, with a minimum of two inches between boxes for adequate ventilation. The amount of air exchange will depend on the level of fumes being given off by the oil or contaminant.

Even with the interior temperature of the transport vehicle set between 18-20°C(65-70°F), transporters should make sure the animals do not overheat in hot weather, or become

chilled if the weather is cool and adjust the temperature accordingly. In judging the comfort of his or her passengers the transporter will consider the species, their ages, degree of oiling, wetness, and level of activity. Signs of discomfort include shuffling, thumping, and constant vocalizing. For long journeys, birds should be checked every hour or so.

When transporting perching birds, transporters should try to position the carrier so that when the vehicle accelerates or slows the bird only needs to shift its weight. In other words, face perched birds perpendicular to a vehicles' momentum.

As for confining conspecifics in close quarters for transport, some normally gregarious species, like Western grebes, will not tolerate being confined together in close proximity. Certain species however can tolerate being housed together. Care must be taken that the animals have enough ventilation and do not overheat. The decision to house conspecifics together should be left to someone with experience. In general, the following species have been successfully transported together: pelicans, common murre, guillemots, auklets, horned grebes, eared grebes, most duck species, mergansers, geese, swans, penguins, terns, skimmers, sandpipers, avocets, stilts, and American coots.

When transporting larger birds that can safely be housed together, like pelicans or penguins, minivans and hatchbacks can be quickly and easily modified to hold quite a few at once. Waterproof tarps are used to enclose the rear area of the vehicle, protecting the floor and sides. Sheets line the bottom for footing and to absorb waste. Additional sheets are used as curtains to block the windows and doors.

In conclusion, it can be stated with certainty, careful handling, appropriate housing, and administration of first aid care significantly increases the chances that oiled birds will survive capture, temporary confinement, and transportation. The tools and techniques suggested in this paper are just that – suggestions. While they have proven successful in the past, each new situation will present a unique set of circumstances that will require innovation and sound judgment when planning for and providing optimum care of oiled birds.