

BIRD CARE & CONSERVATION SOCIETY

CARING FOR RESCUED BIRDS SERIES

Initial Examination of Rescued Birds

Anita Williamson

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1. Receipt of Bird

There are two basic reasons for a bird requiring rescue disease and injury.

When the bird arrives record the date and where it has come from. The details of the circumstances of encounter should also be written down because they may help to determine what the injury and treatment should be. If for example the bird has been found on or near the road this could indicate a car strike. Near a cat could indicate a cat attack.

Determine what species of bird it is. A good field guide is helpful.

Is the bird an adult or juvenile? The age of the bird may determine the diet it will need.

The exact location where found. If the bird is an adult and can be released it may be crucial to release in the area found.

If juvenile and does not appear to be injured or sick it may be in the bird's best interests to try to reunite it with its parents, once again the exact area found will be necessary.

PLEASE NOTE

Some species of young birds may simply be waiting where their parents left them for their parents to return with food. In this case it may be inappropriate to remove them.

Once the reason for rescue and the extent of injuries are determined, the question of whether it is releasable or not should be asked. This may not be always be known until treatment is attempted, however if irreversible damage is obvious we must assess the future life of the bird.

After living in the wild, many of these creatures will not settle into captivity as a cripple.

Remember, euthanasia can often be the kindest option.

2. Examination

Birds in severe shock may need to be left in a dark, warm, quiet place for sometime before beginning examination.

Observe from a distance- alertness, posture, behaviour, perching, weight-bearing, sense of balance. Is the bird 'fluffed' up? This may indicate shock, weakness or disease (temperature).

After making the above observations quickly and quietly catch the bird and restrain

(Refer to section on restraint)

Body Temperature

Shock and disease reduce body temperature in most instances therefore you will need to increase heat supply to 28o (use an accurate thermometer placed next to the bird and check regularly) Be aware in summer that only minimal additional heat may be necessary.

Eyes

Check the eyes if both eyes are closed or partially closed this may indicate illness, weakness and or shock.

One eye closed or partially closed may indicate a problem in that eye only.
E.g.

Head injury, infection (trichomoniasis), trauma (pecked by other birds etc.)

Eye injuries must always be treated by a vet as soon as possible. They are too important to mess around with. Never put anything but warm water in a bird's eye. Not salt, not boracic acid, **NOTHING**. The damage you do may be irreversible.

Trichomoniasis also causes eye trouble in species affected, as detailed further on, with sometimes only one eye affected (never forget to check the throat for lesions caused by this disease !)

Head Injuries

Repeated side to side movements, eyes flicking from side to side, head tilted or hanging may all indicate head injury or poisoning.

Feathers missing from the scalp with or without skin damage can indicate car strike or other impact, or that the bird has been attacked by other birds.

Seizures or convulsions may indicate poisoning or brain damage.

Ears

Check for bleeding or other discharges. The ears are found at the sides of the head, below and to the side of the eyes.

Feathers

Matting of feathers around the top of the head or face may indicate the bird has been vomiting.

Severe feather damage may require the bird to stay in captivity until new feathers grow. For example some birds lose all their tail feathers as a result of cat or dog attack.

Symmetry

This is checking the evenness (matching one half of the bird to the other half). It is a very useful way of finding swellings and abnormalities.

Feel the left wing all the way along then do the same with the right wing, etc. The manner in which this procedure is carried out will depend on how easy the bird is to restrain and what helpers you have on hand.

Beak and throat

Check that the nostrils are clear and that the cere is not damaged. Some raptors have baffles in their nostrils. These allow the raptor to breathe whilst flying a great speed. Do not try to remove them.

Check the throat of all rescued birds for the following

- **Throatworms:**

Magpies, ravens and boobooks are some of the species in which throatworms can be found. The tiny worms may be seen coming out from the sides of the throat, or can be seen as pinhead-size lumps in the throat and mouth which often looks slimy and grey.

- **Trichomoniasis (also known as canker or frounce)**

Pigeons, magpies, ravens, birds of prey and birds of the parrot family are some of species that contract trichomoniasis. It may be diagnosed from a slimy appearing mouth, yellowish lesions in the mouth and throat and a foul, fishy smell.

Examine under bright light as necessary or these symptoms may be missed.

Caution- very bright light may cause distress in some species if they are already in shock, therefore use dim light for some parts of the examination that do not require bright light - such as feeling for symmetry or broken bones.

Use all senses when examining a bird- sight, hearing, smell and touch.

Respirations (breathing)

Is the bird breathing normally? Or is the breathing laboured? What is the rate of breathing? Are there unusual sounds whilst breathing?

Bleeding

Because bird's blood clots reasonably quickly friars balsam or simple pressure applied to the area may be enough to control bleeding. Bleeding from the nose or the mouth may indicate internal haemorrhage. This is often seen after car strikes. Bruising is seen as dark blue/purple areas. Often fractures are found at these sites, so feel for this.

Weight assessment

If the keel or breastbone is very prominent then the bird is under weight. If the bird is also ill then it is more likely to be an illness that has been present for some time. If the bird's keel is well covered i.e. not under weight but ill, then it is more likely to be an acute (sudden) illness.

Abdomen

Check for bruising or swelling, (this can often occur in orphans blown from nests during storms).

Vent (cloaca)

Ensure the vent is free from droppings

Parasites

Weight loss and loose droppings (these may be blood tinged) can indicate internal parasites such as worms. Check for external parasites. Lice may be visible. Or the bird might appear moth-eaten. Flat flies may also be present.

Legs and feet

Check if the bird is bearing weight evenly on both feet. Check the strength of grip with both feet comparing one to the other. Check for fractures, bruising and dislocations. Also check that the toes are positioned correctly for that species and whether the bird is able to perch.

Wings

Check for fractures, bruising or dislocations of wings comparing one wing to the other. A problem with a wing can be detected by assessing the strength of wing after being extended and released.

If you fully extend the wing the bird will often quickly retract it; therefore if the wing doesn't spring back it may indicate trauma to the wing.

Make sure that the wings are level with each other, if they are not it could indicate dislocation or a break in the droopy wing.

3. The gaining of knowledge and experience

Even though you may not be able to make a conclusion as to what the problem is with the bird, you will:

have gained further experience in determining what is normal and what is abnormal,

have collected enough information to give to an experienced BCCS member or your veterinarian. This information may lead to a diagnosis and appropriate treatment.

Don't expect to always find out what the problem is! Look at everything on the bird, because until we know what is normal, we won't be able to recognise what is abnormal.

Always bear in mind that there may be more than one injury or more than one symptom of disease. Complete the examination in full, even though you may have found for example a fracture in a wing.

Crepitus is the sound of broken bones rubbing together. You may only feel this, or you may hear it as well. It is not heard or felt in all fractures, some fractures leave bone ends far apart due to over-stretching of muscle and tendons or ligaments, this is common in fractures that have occurred not so recently.

If you have the bird euthanased, examine it again once it is dead as a lot more can be seen. We don't however, recommend that carers carry out autopsies due to health risks.

Actual leg paralysis can be misdiagnosed as it may only be due to the bird being weak from shock, illness or starvation.

EVERYBIRD- A guide to Bird Health- author Pat MacWhirter

This book should belong to everyone that takes in sick or injured birds, if your bookshop doesn't stock it, ask them to order it for you!

4. Some useful hints to restrain

- Covering the head calms the bird. Towels, centre of toilet roll, cream containers with bottom removed and smoothed are some examples of useful items. Watch that breathing is not restricted.
- Gloves may be necessary to catch the bird in some species, however the examination needs to be carried out without gloves.
- Place a towel or face washer in the feet of raptors as they can clench their feet, this will prevent them from piercing their own feet which can cause bumble-foot as it allows a pathway for infection.

See 'Veterinary Considerations of Raptor Rehabilitation' fact sheet, and 'Avian Diseases' fact sheet for further information on diseases of birds.