

Focus on Catching and Transporting of Parrots

By EB Cravens

A dear friend of mine once told me how adept he was at grabbing parrots out of the air to catch and transport them to the veterinarian's office. That is how the two amazon parrots I had stopped by his house to pick up, were captured and boxed. While visiting I also assisted in trying corner and catch by hand a young sun conure hen that had escaped her cage. Needless to say, none of these psittacines is now very fond of human beings or their hands!

In the case of the sun, I suppose, this fact does not matter much; for I will have little contact with her in the years ahead. But with the amazons who have made the journey to Hawaii to live in my aviaries, it is a different matter. I can only hope they are intelligent enough to distinguish me from other humans who treated them roughly. If so, in the months ahead, I may be able to coax them to take nuts from my hand.

Truly, as many aviculturists realize, the sensitive catching and transport of caged birds—especially those who were once wild and free—is a difficult task. So many subtle factors will determine the level of stress placed upon a parrot during this operation. Cage design can provide for easy or troublesome catching of an unwilling parrot. Netting technique has a lot to do with it, as other imaginative trapping procedures. Even time of day can make a difference to some psittacines about to be transported. In the case of my two amazons, it perhaps was best, considering I wish to eventually befriend them, that someone else caught them from the aviary. However, a net used by a keeper would have somewhat displaced their fears of human fingers--kind of making the *net* the “bad guy”!

Many is the time, when forced to use a net to catch a parrot, that I will leave it there in the new cage for several minutes to draw the parrot's focus away from me, the keeper. Other occasions, upon releasing a psittacine from a net, I will throw the net to the ground with a crash, strongly reinforcing the impression that it and I are separate.

It must be emphasized: *I do not like netting captive birds*. It is a crude, if sometimes necessary, method for catching up avian species who have absolutely no desire to come to their keepers voluntarily. By far the nicest and easiest way to get a bird into a carrying cage is to stick out a finger and say “up”, then move it carefully inside and gently close the door! But for those of you who also keep parrots which are no longer well-behaved pets, this is, of course, unrealistic.

Given that netting a recalcitrant parrot is not the gentlest choice, there are many alternative ways to catch and transport a bird. One of my favorites is to arrange a closing flap on the nestbox, and while the psittacines are inside, merely pull the flap shut. The entire box may then be unhooked and transported. This is an excellent way to move breeding pairs from one aviary to another provided your means of walking or carrying the birds is calm, stable and safe. Transport by car in such a case should be well planned and considered!

Of course, this also means getting up before dawn in order to catch the birds inside sleeping. Parrots which roost year round in a box—conures, lorries, some eclectus, etc.—are easily moved in this manner. For the “cagier” ones, I use a 10-foot stiff fish line string attached to the close-out slat and run some distance outside the cage to where I can sneak up and pull the door shut.

This technique has the added advantage of getting birds moved early in the day to their new flight. Once a box is closed up tight with the parrots inside, I go back to bed until sunrise; then move the birds at first light. This gives them the entire day to get used to new surroundings before the fearful first night in a new cage! Whenever possible, parrots should be transferred to new homes before 12 noon. It will give them a chance to settle in before shadows lengthen and dusk falls.

We would not advise using the nestbox transport method to take birds a long distance or to a veterinarian. They are difficult to handle from such a site.

For those psittacines who do not frequent a nestbox, catching them without netting and stress can be a problem. I have devised a small, low carry cage with a hinged wire top. This cage is placed in the aviary a few hours before feeding time every day for a week—the top lifted open and leaned against the cage wire near the regular feeding station. I place some branches or flowers in this cage to draw the parrots’ attention. When feeding time arrives, the birds’ food bowl is placed in the bottom of this cage. After some days when the parrots are enticed in to eat from the bowl, I pull a fish line string which drops the top down, closing the carry cage. Presto! All ready to transport.

Netting Technique

The story is told of a well-known avian importer who could always tell the expertise of the clients who bought his birds, from the way they handled a net inside the finch aviary. Anyone observed netting a bird by trapping it against the cage wire was promptly escorted outside! Truly, the best netting technique is to intercept a bird in flight, neatly sweeping it out of the air. With psittacines, a wide net is vital to accommodate most of their wingspans.

Parrots correctly netted will fly full force into the tapered bottom of the net and be immobilized. Sheer, fine netting material is good as it allows parrots to see out, but does not entangle any sharp toenails. A most important rule when netting a flighty bird is to plan well the attempt in order that a single precise sweep will succeed. I like to keep the net hidden behind my back, handle down opening facing my body, then draw it out and sweep in a continuous motion. It is poor practice—and most stressful for a parrot--to be swinging and chasing a bird around the cage! When aviary design makes it impossible to reach birds easily in a corner; then two persons should be used to catch the psittacine. (Incidentally cages built with this fault can be *very* dangerous if an emergency demands quick removal of occupants say during a fire or harmful bird fight.)

Of course, with parrots that do not fly, it may be necessary to trap them on the cage wire. Opaque heavy clothing or a dark towel often work best, especially if a handler must fold the cloth under the parrot to disentangle beak and claws gripping the wire firmly. Not a pretty picture is it? No wonder so many hobbyists these days prefer 100% handfed captive-raised parrots in their home and aviaries!

Transport

OK we've got the parrot in the carry cage. Now there are many styles of carry cages available. Some should not be used with chewing parrots (like the thin plastic kind with intelligent cockatoos!). Others are too dark and secluded for the liking of my pet birds. Believe it or not, pet hookbills may be more comfortable and safe on a perch in a small cage riding in the passenger seat in the car than cooped up in a scary dark box in the back.

I have had long—time parrot travel companions who perched on top such a “mobile home cage” driving across the U.S. But this was smooth interstate expressway travel and an owner must know *well* the behavior habits of his bird and always be on guard before employing that method of travel.

Another good rule is: If you carry your pet around in a small cage, be wary of setting her down on the floor. This is a very undesirable, vulnerable-seeming location for most treetop species. If a parrot commences hanging up in the corner on the side wire of its cage, it is feeling a higher level of stress or insecurity. This often happens on bumpy roads or where nearby power line poles outside the windows frighten the pet. Sometimes the best solution is to cover the entire cage with a towel, or just the top and sides leaving only one view open.

Or Perhaps it's the Perch....

Several comfortable perch sites should always be provided in a carry cage. I start with a thick towel or t-shirt on the cage bottom, anchored to provide stable footing. Thinner than normal perches are given so that psittacines can grip them tighter. One thicker perch can be set at towel—floor level.

In airline carry crates, square rug samples may be substituted for a towel since toweling (unlike a t-shirt) will snag and entrap a toenail. Owners transporting their birds under the airline seat would do well to purchase approved bird carrier containers *without* full wire tops. Many pet birds become uncomfortable when carried around in a box with a wide open roof above their heads. The carriers with full tops offer more security. If the former type is used, drape a privacy cloth over it leaving the handle available.

Timid, reclusive, and wild—trapped psittacines usually prefer travel in a darker container. One of our favorites is a long, low pine or plywood professional shipping box

(three-compartment adjustable) with 4” round wire windows at the front. A bird can either peek out or hide depending upon choice. Cautious aviculturists prefer to ship mated pairs in separate compartments in a box. Perhaps a wire viewing window between compartments would be desirable. Once again, such boxes are provided with a cloth-grip bottom, or a perch or both. I like to tape a small plastic food bowl in the front by the window. It keeps seed and feed much cleaner than just throwing a handful in the crate. (Of course, the occasional dear pet will fretfully chew the plastic dish to splinters just to show me how “poorly” I am treating him!) A small water dish is anchored nearby or for short jaunts. Wedges of apple, orange, grapes, etc. are provided. Most often, toys are removed when transporting a bird; certainly they should not be left jangling in the parrot’s face while moving.

As you can see, much of the preparation for sensitively catching and transporting psittacines takes only a little foresight and planning to anticipate and meet all the birds’ needs. I can always tell when one of my parrots has journeyed well. He or she hops out of the carrier, unruffled and appearing the same as when the excursion began.... and looking inside on the floor, I see perfectly—formed normal parrot droppings, unaffected by diarrhea or stress discolorations.

With aloha, EB

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