

Seabirds and Waterbirds

Rehabilitation and Care

The word seabirds embraces a diverse group of birds. Some swim and can't fly. Others spend their lives over the sea coming ashore only to nest. Others migrate huge distances, and yet others simply run around on the sea shores chasing small crustaceans.

Despite these differences however, they do require similar types of housing in captivity.



Common problems

Seabirds come into care for a wide variety of reasons. Some of the more common problems include exhaustion on arrival from migration. Cormorants, Pelicans and Gulls are often entangled in netting, fishing line and fish hooks. Little penguins can suffer from exhaustion, starvation, and sometimes distress during their annual moult. Oil contamination is also always a danger.

If a bird is in poor condition a heavy infestation of external parasites will further debilitate it. It is also likely to have a heavy load of internal worms. A pyrethrum based spray can be applied to the feathers and Ivermectin or Moxystectin given (injected into a fish) to reduce the internal worm load.

Oiled birds should be cleaned with liquid soap or detergent at a rate of 1% soap/detergent to 99% warm water (Sunlight and Amway LOC are two recommended brands). The bird's body is immersed in the cleansing solution; the solution is then pressed into the feathers with the hands, working with the lay of the feathers. After several baths, when no further oil can be removed and the bird appears clean, it should be thoroughly rinsed off. The bird should then be put in a warm draught-free place to dry. It is critical to keep the feathers undamaged as it is the structure of the feathers that ensure that the bird becomes waterproof and buoyant. A poncho should be fitted to stop an oiled bird from preening and thus consuming the oil.



Fish hooks are a common problem. These can best be removed by cutting off the eye of the hook and continuing the passage of the hook through the flesh. An X-ray may be needed for a swallowed fish hook but in the case of pelicans it is sometimes possible to physically reach down the throat and into its stomach, but this procedure is best carried out while the bird is sedated or under anaesthetic.

Handling



All seabirds have long pointed beaks often with sharp hooks on the ends. Large seabirds such as gannets, darters and cormorants are capable of inflicting severe damage, especially to the eyes.

When handling these birds always wear sunglasses or glasses, and hold the bird with its wings

folded against its body and facing away from you. Wrap the feet and body in a towel, rendering useless those parts that could injure you. Try to avoid distressing the bird and above all don't inflict any further injuries during the handling. Wading birds in particular have long very fragile legs: great care must be taken not to injure them.



Many of these birds, (especially cormorants and darters) have sharply hooked bills equipped with a hacksaw-like serrated edge designed for gripping slimy prey. Should one latch onto your finger leave it there and prise the beak open with the other hand. This may be painful but it will avoid a nasty laceration, which is likely if you try to pull your finger out.



The order *Pelecaniforme* comprises six distinct families of aquatic birds, all except tropicbirds have very small nostrils that sometimes lack an external opening. If the beak is held completely shut, breathing is restricted and the bird will become agitated and could suffocate. For example gannets need to prevent the entry of water when diving. Birds that plunge dive into water from some height, do not have external nares but breathe through their mouths.

Nursing care and temporary housing

Any sick bird must be kept in a quiet, warm, draught-free environment. A temperature of 20-25C should be aimed at. As the bird becomes stronger the temperature can gradually be brought to normal room temperature and it can then be allowed outside during daylight hours.

When a bird is in shock it is best kept in a small covered cage or box, and as it recovers it can be moved to a larger cage to provide room for exercise.

Seabirds can suffer from a build up of faeces around the vent. If this happens allow the sick bird to bathe in a small bath of warm water. This will soften the faeces and it will probably then defecate.

Birds that are washed up on the beaches (especially after migration) are often dehydrated. A vet can treat these birds intravenously or subcutaneously, but less severe cases can be given a solution "Spark"



electrolyte formula by Vetfarm or glucose in water made up by dissolving one teaspoon of glucose powder in 100 ml of warm water. Try to get the bird to drink by dipping the beak in the liquid. If this is not effective, an eye dropper or syringe with tubing attached can be used. However, great care must be taken to ensure that none of the liquid goes down the bird's windpipe. The quantity may then be reduced day by day as the bird recovers.

Migratory birds (especially shearwaters) washed up on beaches in the spring are usually suffering severe exhaustion as a result of their very long voyages. They may encounter adverse winds and insufficient food. They may not have built up enough fat to carry them through the weeks of travel. Whatever the problem many birds will arrive on our shores only to collapse and die on our beaches. These birds are nearly always beyond help. Wildlife carers must collect these birds and remove them from the beaches where they can be subject to attack by dogs or other birds while still alive. On the other hand the juveniles suffering from exhaustion and arriving in autumn are nearly always in good physical condition but simply tired from their first flight. Three or four days of care is often all that these birds will need to revive them. If the young bird is uninjured it will generally not require feeding and should be released in a suitable spot with a slope where it can face into the prevailing wind for takeoff. Choose a slope which allows the bird to run to become airborne. Be patient, let the bird get its bearings first.



Outside housing

Most aviaries can be adapted for the use of seabirds. However, all waterbirds have feet sensitive to rough surfaces. The aviary should be large enough for the bird to be able to exercise its wings, it must have shelter, an exercise area and a swimming pool.

Flooring - Seabirds, like all waterbirds, have feet that are sensitive to hard and rough surfaces. They do not normally spend a lot of time standing and can suffer foot lesions and keel abrasions and infections. The feet can become cracked and infected from standing on hard surfaces for long periods. Not recommended are concrete, tiles that can become wet and slippery, wire, or anything kept permanently damp such as carpet.

Suitable flooring therefore includes:

- soft rubber matting
- beach sand
- grass (a moveable pen works well for this flooring)
- newspaper
- towelling (cleaned daily)
- artificial turf.



Water - Although water is essential to all birds it is especially important for seabirds. They don't merely drink it, they live in it, they play in it, they thrive in it - it is their element. Swimming not only helps to keep the plumage shiny and clean, but also after just a splash bath or a quick swim they spend hours preening while their feathers dry. In this important activity the bill is used to restore feather structure, to clean the plumage, to apply preening oils and rearrange displaced feathers. This activity helps keep the feathers waterproof. To this end, however, the surface of the water must always be kept clean and free of scum.

Suitable water containers include:

- child's paddling pool
- old laundry tub
- bath



Always make sure the bird has a means of getting out of the water if it wishes to do so.



At first the bird must be watched carefully to ensure that the feathers are not getting waterlogged or that it is not shivering. If it starts to shiver remove it from the "pond", wrap it in a towel to remove excess moisture, and place in a draught-free place to recover. If the bird is in care for a short time only (a few days), then fresh water can be used for bathing. However, over a longer period the salt glands will cease to function and will need to be reactivated before release. If seawater is unavailable salt can be added to the water. Swimming pool salt is an acceptable substitute.



Perches - A good sturdy branch or log is essential for some species, and half submerged logs and rocks will be used by cormorants and gulls. Penguins require an artificial burrow, and to this end a wooden box with a sack inside works well. Also, most birds appreciate bunches of leaves and grasses for shelter.



Diet

Natural diets - In the wild, seabirds eat a wide variety of foods including fish, squid, crustaceans, aquatic plants, insects and so on. It is therefore very important to correctly identify the bird in order to give it the most suitable diet in captivity.

Captive diets - A very sick bird may have to be tube-fed and will need to be fed small quantities a number of times a day. Fish eaters can be given blended fish mixed with high protein baby cereal and water, and non meat eaters can be given High Protein baby food mixed with water alone.

Most fish eating birds are reluctant at first to eat in captivity and will have to be force fed. With experience one person can do this, but you may need a couple of people to give you a hand when force feeding your first cormorant! However, after a few days the birds may take food direct from your hand, thrown into the water or thrown for the bird to catch.

The whole fish must always be dipped into warm water (salted for seabirds) and then placed head-first down the throat of the bird, with the size of fish matching the size of bird. It may be necessary to massage the throat gently to help the bird swallow. Whitebait are very well accepted by most seabirds, including penguins, but larger birds might require larger fish such as yellowtail, sardines, whiting and the like. At first the bird will need to be given 3-6 small fish a number of times a day. This quantity increasing as it becomes less stressed during the feeding operation. After feeding the bird leave it secure and alone or it may regurgitate the food and you will then have to try feeding it over again.



Sick or injured birds will not be able to handle large amounts of food. Give small amounts frequently. The following are a few examples of how much to force-feed your bird. However, once the bird is self-feeding it will surprise you with the quantity consumed. Penguins will happily take fish that appear to be nearly as big as themselves.

Most seabirds will start to self-feed within three days. A dish of salted water should be supplied. The fish can then be dropped into the water and the bird left alone to help itself. A penguin, however will never feed itself in captivity as it does not recognise dead fish as food.

Frozen fish should be supplemented with thiamine (vitamin B1). If you are using frozen fish, therefore, the bird should be given a daily dose of multi vitamins. Alternatively, Vetafarm make a special "Seabird Tablet" that can be inserted into a small fish that is to be fed to the bird.

The following is a guide for the quantity of food taken by various species:

- Terns - 6 whitebait twice daily
- Shearwaters and gulls - 8 whitebait 3 times a day, or equivalent squid
- Penguins and gannets- 5-6 small whiting or pilchards twice daily
- Pelicans - 10 whiting or small mullet twice daily.



Insect eating birds may be encouraged to eat by placing mealworms, worms or crustaceans into their water bowl.

Salt supplementation - If a seabird has been kept in captivity, and not given access to salt water, it will have to have its salt glands reactivated. This will have to be done by giving it a salt supplement one to two weeks before release. A salt tablet can be inserted into the gut of the fish. The dose should be increased slowly, starting at 25 mg per kg body weight, increasing after a few days to 50 mg, 75 mg and finally 100 mg per kg body weight. Secretions from the nasal glands should be visible.

Nestling care

Housing

Nestlings and very young birds should be kept in a covered box with a heat lamp over one corner. If it is impossible to buddy-up a single bird then a mop head suspended over the end of the box will give it somewhere secure to hide.

Young birds can be housed in a large cardboard box with wire mesh over the top. This has the advantage of being draft-free, secure, does not damage the feathers and is disposable when no longer needed. Seabird guano can be impossible to scrub off cage floors and wire. They should only need this type of housing for about two weeks, until ready to go outside.



Outside Housing

A floor-less rabbit hutch type pen is suitable. This pen can then be moved across the lawn each day, thus keeping their housing clean. The walls of the pen are best made of plastic mesh or shade cloth rather than wire. An agitated bird will repeatedly try to push its beak through the wire until it is bleeding from the flesh around its upper beak. They must have a box in one corner for security, especially at night. Without this box to shelter in the bird will remain agitated all day, seldom if ever sitting. A large bowl of water is needed (an inverted plastic garbage bin lid works well but it will need to be supported at the edges). A few rocks close by will be used by the bird to perch on when preening. They will spend hours puddling in the water bathing and foraging for food that can be thrown into the pool. Salt water is essential. The water must be changed regularly as a seabird will not enter the water if it is not clean.



If they are housed in an aviary, the best floor covering will be beach sand. It is important to remember that all water birds are susceptible to

bumblefoot and so proper flooring is essential. Never leave hard surfaces bare. Use sand or even outdoor carpeting and above all keep it clean and dry.

Release

Condition - Birds are involved in a perpetual struggle for food. Direct competition often results in confrontation that usually ends in the strongest taking the prize. It is essential, therefore, that the bird should be a good weight for that species. It should have undamaged and waterproof feathers, and it must be able to maintain its body temperature after prolonged times in the water, the salt glands must be functioning and it should be acting normally for that species.

Time and place



All birds must be released in a suitable place where other birds of its species congregate, and the weather conditions must be studied. It is no good releasing a bird if gale force winds are likely next day. Injured migratory birds must be released at least a month before migration, or they may need to be held captive until the following year and this must be taken into account when rescuing these birds. However, juvenile shearwaters may be rescued in an exhausted state. This is often caused by them confronting adverse weather conditions as they leave their burrows. Often in this case a few days rest and feeding-up is enough to see them on their way.

Different times of the day are more suitable than others for some birds. Early morning is the best release time for most birds. However, penguins start to congregate near their roosting sites about an hour before sunset and this is the optimum time to release these birds. They get disorientated when released from the beach, and they should be paddled out to deeper water. Shearwaters and gannets should be taken to calm water and allowed to paddle out.



While in captivity seabirds appear to lose the muscle tone in their wings and it may take the bird up to two hours to regain flight capabilities. By releasing them in quiet waters they can regain flight capabilities at their own pace. Should they be unfit to go they will return to the beach and can be taken back into care.

Nocturnal species should of course be released after dark.

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