

Wildlife Emergency and Critical Care

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KEYWORDS

• Wildlife • Critical care • Emergency • Avian • Reptile • Small mammal

KEY POINTS

- To treat wildlife patients, it is essential that veterinarians know how to properly handle and restrain common species.
- As in domestic species, physical examination, blood work, and knowledge of common conditions are important in making a diagnosis and properly treating a patient.
- Pain can be difficult to assess in wildlife patients, and analgesics have not been studied in many species; however, there are an increasing number of studies and resources to assist veterinarians.
- It is important that veterinarians are aware of state and federal laws that relate to wildlife.

BIRDS

Patient Assessment

A visual examination should be done before handling any wildlife patient. This provides the veterinarian with the opportunity to see how the animal is breathing; standing; holding its head, body, and appendages; and how it is behaving. In some cases, it may be appropriate to observe the animal in an enclosure where free movement or flight is possible and gait, fitness, and other behaviors can be more easily assessed. This observational period is a crucial part of the initial examination.

Equipment necessary for handling should be chosen based on the patient's size, behavior, defense tactics, and planned diagnostics. If diagnostics such as venipuncture or radiographs are planned, be sure that necessary items and appropriate caging are set up before restraining the patient. Handling should be done in close proximity to the caging when possible.

Sedation and Anesthesia

If an animal is believed to be medically stable, but appears psychologically stressed, time to relax, sedation, or anesthesia are reasonable options. In cases of extreme

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stress or excessive pain, anesthesia or sedation may be necessary for a complete physical examination and will provide a stress-free opportunity to do diagnostics such as blood work and radiographs.

Avian Handling and Restraint

Many birds can be restrained and handled with an appropriately sized towel. For raptors, in addition to towels, leather gloves of various sizes, lengths, and thickness should be used as a level of protection from talons. A hood or other covering can be used to calm any bird. Even when hooded, care should be taken to control the head of a raptor and its potentially damaging beak. Some raptors, once hooded, may become more manageable if cast on their backs. Longer gloves should be used for birds with hooked beaks, such as vultures and cormorants. Eye protection is important when handling birds with stabbing beaks, such as large egrets, herons, and anhingas. When in doubt, be safe and use all forms of personal protective equipment.

Birds housed in larger aviaries may require nets to assist in capture. Once caught in the net, towels can be used to get the patient in hand.

When handling any bird, be careful with the feathers to prevent damage and be sure to allow for proper breathing by not pushing down on the sternum with excessive force. In birds that lack nares, such as pelicans, make sure the restraint allows them to breathe through their mouths. Stressed or fractious birds may also benefit from anxiolytics, such as midazolam or diazepam, given before a full examination.

Physical Examination

The carrier should be examined once the bird is in hand to check for any signs of blood and to look at feces and urates for color, volume, and consistency. If you cannot get a weight in the carrier, it is important to get a weight as part of the initial examination. Weights are necessary in dosing medications and determining feeding and fluid requirements in addition to measuring success of treatment. Raptors and other potentially dangerous birds can most easily be weighed in a box or carrier, but also can be wrapped in a towel with only the feet out and easily accessible to gloved hands.

Early in the examination, assess the patient for signs of shock:

- Depression
- Cyanosis
- Tachycardia, which can progress to bradycardia as the bird decompensates
- Hypothermia

A basic neurologic examination also should be done on all patients to look for signs of head trauma or signs of paresis or paralysis. A full ophthalmologic examination is imperative. Continue by examining the ears, nares, and oral cavity of the bird looking for any abnormalities including blood or discharge of any type. Palpate all bones to identify fractures. In a bird that is not flying, radiographs can be very important, as coracoid fractures can be difficult or impossible to identify by palpation.

Basic Diagnostics

In a stable bird, it is acceptable to take up to 1% of body weight in blood for a minimum database and any additional diagnostics, such as testing for toxins or infectious diseases. Fecal examinations (directs, floats, Gram stains) also can be helpful, and should be done on any new patient, as heavy parasitic burdens may impede recovery.

Radiographs are a valuable diagnostic tool important for looking at anything from broken bones, to enlarged organs, to metal or other foreign bodies in the bird.

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