

**Bird Grooming Tips:  
Coping, Nail Trims and Bathing Options**

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**Abstract:**

As trainers and keepers, we are responsible for the overall health and welfare of the animals in our collections. By providing healthy diets and living environments for our birds, we help ensure that they are kept in optimal condition. There are, however, times when we must assist our birds in maintaining their beaks, nails and feathers. This paper will share some strategies we use at Natural Encounters, Inc. to accomplish this. It will cover how we cope and maintain our birds of prey as well as how we perform voluntary nail trims on our parrots and corvids. It will also discuss some bathing options for different groups of birds.

**Paper:**

At Natural Encounters, Inc. we use a variety of tools to manage our birds' beaks, nails and feathers.

*Beaks*

We cope our hawk and eagle beaks on a regular basis. Regarding other groups of birds, we only cope their beaks if there is an issue, which is extremely rare. We ensure there is no need to cope our parrot beaks by always providing them a variety of opportunities for chewing toys, natural branches as well as untreated 2x4 boards.

When we cope a bird, the bird is restrained. For this reason, we prepare all tools ahead of time to minimize the time the bird is restrained. (Figure 1) Because the bird is restrained, we take advantage of this opportunity to clip nails and perform equipment maintenance (greasing anklets, jesses, etc.) if necessary as well as spray the birds with Scalex® mite and lice spray. We use a towel to restrain our birds so that they associate the towel with the negative experience rather than the trainer or the trainer's hands or behavior leading up to restraint. When we clip nails, the leg is held straight by the trainer restraining the bird to ensure the bird cannot foot the trainer doing the clipping.



Figure 1. Coping tools. A-towel, B- Scalex®, C- Vitahawk Jess Grease®, D- X-Acto® knife, E- variety of clippers, F- Dremel®.

In preparation for coping, we hold the bird's head in one hand with the first two fingers supporting the back of the head and the tip of the thumb inserted into the mouth to hold the mouth open, being careful to make sure the tongue is comfortably placed under the thumb and the eyes are not being covered by our fingers. (Figure 2) To open the mouth, we gently pull on the skin underneath the bird's beak, which opens the mouth enough for us to then gently insert the tip of the thumb.



Figure 2. Holding the head.

We then take the clippers with the flat edge and line them up on the side of the beak straight along the line of the beak so about half the clipper surface is on the beak, the other half is not on anything. (Figure 3) Being extremely careful not to cut the cere, we make the cut. When done correctly, the keratin should crack along the curve of the beak. It is important not to cut too deep or too much. We then use the same clippers or smaller cuticle clippers to clip off any pieces that are left attached. We repeat the process on the other side. We then use a cordless Dremel®, being careful to have our hand anchored or leaning on something so the Dremel® does not float in the air but is under control, to smooth the inside edges of the beak. It is important to have the Dremel® steady, as it and the bird's beak will jump slightly when they first make contact. Once the sides are done, we close the beak to clip the tip. We again use the Dremel® to shape and smooth the point of the beak. (Figure 4) The beak should taper to the tip once it passes the mandible and it is important to have symmetry on both sides so the beak grows evenly.



Figure 3. Keeping the mouth open with the thumb, line up the clippers to make the first cut.



Figure 4. Use the Dremel® to smooth the edges and tip of the beak.

### *Nails*

We provide a variety of perching options, including natural perches so our birds have opportunities for their nails to wear down naturally. Providing bathing options also helps with nail care. When needed, we trim our hawk, owl and eagle nails while the birds are on the glove. (Figure 5)



Figure 5. Trimming a hawk's nails on the glove.

Our parrots and corvids are trained for voluntary nail trims. With the voluntary nail trims, the birds are inside their enclosure and sit on a designated perch that they've been trained to for their nail trims. They are cued to lift a foot and grab the cage wire and then the trainer uses the Dremel® to dull the tips of the nails from outside the enclosure, providing food reinforcers during the session. (Figure 6 and 7)



Figure 6. Voluntary nail trip with parrot on designated perch.



Figure 7. Voluntary nail trip with crow on enclosure perch.

Based off an idea introduced to the IAATE by Miguel Santos of Zoomarine in Portugal, we developed a specialized perch that allows us to do voluntary foot inspections and medication application on a variety of birds. It is currently being used with one of our Crowned Cranes who previously had a bumblefoot sore to apply Tuf-Foot® to his feet as a proactive method of keeping his pads in good condition. Tuf-Foot® was recommended to treat certain types of bumblefoot by the veterinarians and trainers from the Minnesota Raptor Center. It has proved successful with our cranes, ducks and Ferruginous Hawk. This perch may also be useful in training voluntary nail trims with birds that may be less comfortable grabbing the side of a cage and more comfortable stepping onto a flat perch. (Figure 8)



Figure 8. Perch developed to inspect and medicate feet.

### *Bathing*

To encourage our bird's feathers to remain in optimal condition, we provide a variety of bathing options. All birds with the exception of our parrots and chickens have daily access to large bathing pools. Additionally, birds have access to rain if they choose. In addition to a poultry waterer for drinking water, our chickens have daily access to sand or

dirt baths. (Figure 9) Sand baths are also provided to our seriemas and ground hornbills on a regular basis. The parrots at our ranch facility get mister baths on a regular basis and have access to rain if they choose. This is in addition to a bowl of drinking water. Because our housing does not allow for regular access to rain at our Disney facility, all of our parrots are rotated through our bath cage. This is a large cage with a mister on a portion of it, which allows for the birds to take baths if they choose. (Figure 10)



Figure 9. Rhode Island Red chickens enjoying a sand bath.





Figure 10. Parrot enjoying a bath in the bath cage.

### *Summary*

At Natural Encounters, Inc. we aim to provide the highest level of care for our animal collection. We use the behavior of the species in the wild as a guide to give the birds what they need to keep their feet, beaks and feathers in optimal condition. When we need to intervene, we aim to make those interactions as positive as possible, using positive reinforcement training whenever we can. When restraint is necessary, our goal is to have the experience be quick and efficient and as stress free as possible.

### **Bio:**

Cassie Malina has been a member of the NEI team since April of 1998. She has produced and performed free-flight bird shows across the country, instructed at NEI Training Workshops, spoken at various parrot societies and presented papers at IAATE, AAZK and PSOA conferences. She has been an active member of the IAATE Board of Directors since 2003.