

A Step Up In Foot Care
By Bobby Brett
Trainer, Natural Encounters, Inc.

The health and welfare of our animals is always on the forefront of any caregiver's mind. This is why we have such obsessive habits such as quadruple-checking locks, using three different disinfectants in one week, collecting umpteen fecal samples a year, and then going back into work at 3 am to check that lock you think you might have missed on that fourth check. This is also why we, as devoted animal caregivers, are always on the lookout for new ideas that will help us to improve our animals' livelihood. As a member of IAATE, the wealth of information that is available is astronomical for pretty much every aspect of care for our birds - from enrichment, to training, to general healthcare. It is the sharing of this information that lead to not only the improvement of our Crowned Cranes' foot health at our facility in Orlando, FL but the ease in which our trainers could view the infected areas and apply medications.

In 2011, Miguel Santos from Zoomarine in Portugal won the Husbandry Behavior of the Year Award for his invention of a viewing platform made of clear acrylic with a mirror underneath that allowed the trainer to view the underside of a Marabou Stork's feet. This allows for a voluntary solution to see a difficult area, which reduces stress for both the bird and the trainer. The idea stuck in my mind immediately as a very promising solution for a problem with Bumblefoot we have with our Crowned Cranes. By being able to view the underside of their feet (which is not that easy, as you can probably imagine) we would be able to take pre-emptive action against the infections. For our cranes, however, it isn't enough to just be able to view the feet. We need to be able to medicate them with a liquid spray called Tuff-foot. Taking this into consideration lead to the variation of Miguel's Marabou platform.

By placing a small panel of 1-inch wire mesh at an angle, I was able to view and apply medication to the pads of the feet. The only problem was having the panel at a height that would allow the trainer to view the underside of the foot without having to lay down on the ground. My solution was a structure that held the panel resting on a base that started at around 8 inches. This seemed to be a comfortable height to allow the trainer to crouch behind the structure and still be able to have a clear view.

My main concern when building this apparatus was stability when the bird put weight on it. Any instability of the base would lead to the bird losing trust in it, thus leading to the behavior breaking down. To counter this, I used some pressure-treated 4x4's to build the base. It worked very well - the entire structure was incredibly stable and strong. The downside was that it made the entire stand so heavy that many of



our trainers expressed challenges when using it. To make the structure more trainer-friendly, I replaced the 4x4's with upright 2x4's which did help to reduce the weight.

Another reason that I wanted to angle the panel was that the medication that we use, Tuf-foot in a pump-action spray bottle, does not work very efficiently unless it is in a vertical position. With this structure, we can hold the bottle vertically which allows us to apply medication much more quickly, decreasing any stress or anxiousness that the bird may have with us interacting with its feet.

So, thanks to Miguel's inspiration, our birds are now enjoying a higher quality of foot health as well as a decrease in stress while having their feet manipulated and medicated. This process has made it easier on our staff, which saves time and reduces anxiety about applying medication because the birds are willing participants in the process. We are all eagerly anticipating the future benefits of having this new behavior and apparatus in our Medical Husbandry arsenal.

