

Trimming Techniques

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Intro

At Natural Encounters, Inc. we are always looking for new ways to maintain and improve the lives of the birds in our care. Because they are not exposed to the wide variety of natural surfaces they would normally encounter in the wild, we need to come up with ways to mimic this as best we can. Nail trims are often important for the overall welfare of our birds and trainers alike. As caretakers for these birds, their foot health is our responsibility. Therefore, facilities can benefit from training voluntary nail trims and performing nail trims as part of their regular husbandry practices.

To imitate various perching surfaces in a show setting, we use natural perches, untreated 2 in x 4 in's, strips of fire hose, and various types of turf. This variety helps maintain overall foot health, but may not wear down the bird's nails as much as we desire. Because we handle most of our birds on the bare hand and some of our birds land on audience member's arms, trimmed nails are a plus. For the last few months I have been focusing on training nail trims using one versatile tool: a nail trim platform. In the past, we have done voluntary nail trims with parrots and corvids. This was done by training them to place their foot up on the side wire of their enclosure while we dull each nail with a battery operated Dremel(Figure 1). I wanted to expand on this behavior by making a perch that could be used with toucans and birds of prey.



Figure 1. Voluntary parrot nail trim.

Toucans

The first perch that was made was a platform for our Toco Toucans (*Rhamphastos toco*). With the original parrot nail trims, we had the bird pick up their foot and place it on the side wire as we used the Dremel to file down the nails. For a toucan, I did not feel this position would be as comfortable because of the way they perch naturally so I wanted to come up with something they could directly stand on with both feet and all nails could be reached easily. The wire mesh is 1 in x 1 in, bent into an arch so that the bird sits in the middle(Figure 2).



Figure 2. Nail trim perch

We began first by desensitizing the bird to the platform. We first placed the platform just outside the cage, stepped up the individual onto the hand and slowly approximated toward the platform. Once right next to the platform, we asked the bird to step off the hand and onto the platform but left the hand present so the bird could step back on immediately. Once the individual seemed comfortable with good body posture, which consisted of wings in and head up, (Figure 3) we added the Dremel.



Figure 3. Toucan on platform with good body posture while using Dremel on nails.

The most challenging part for the bird was the initial movement of the Dremel underneath the bird. Once this step was achieved, we started simply touching each nail with the Dremel for just a moment. The last step was building duration of the Dremel on each toe to the point of filing down the nail (about one second per nail)(Figure 4). Because their nails are dark and the quick is not visible, we step the toucan on and off the platform to feel for comfort on the trainer's hand.

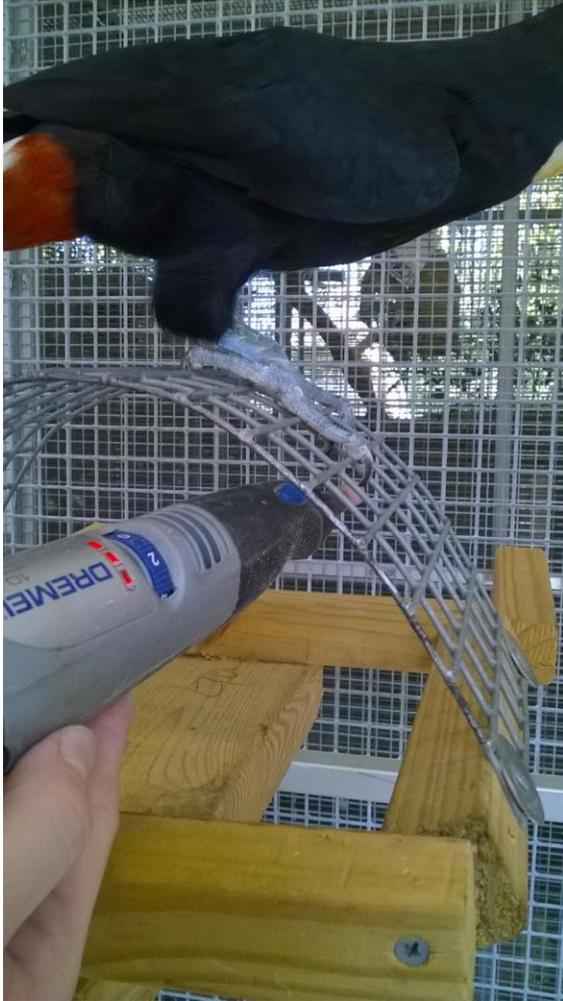


Figure 4. Dremel on toe, filing down nail.

Birds of Prey

The second platform made was for birds of prey. We began using this one with our Harris' Hawks. Typically with our birds of prey they either get their nails clipped while on the glove or clipped when caught up for equipment changing and/or coping. Either way it is not voluntary. I wanted to change this by coming up with a method so they have a choice. This platform design is for voluntary and protected contact nail trimming(Figure 5).





Figure 5. BOP nail trim perch inside enclosure.

The individual has the choice to participate. It has the same exact layout as the toucan platform. With the Harris' Hawk, the main focus was good body posture of both feet on the wire with wings in and head up. Once body posture was calm, we introduced the Dremel. Initial expectations had me thinking the bird would not take well to the Dremel because of previous negative experiences with it, being caught up involuntarily and using the Dremel to cope the beak. I was proved wrong and in one session I was able to touch three nails with the Dremel on the first hawk we trained.(Figure 6). By the second session we were able to trim all nails. We have since moved on to training our other Harris' Hawks and an owl (Figure 7). With our second Harris' Hawk we were able to trim all nails and with our owl we were able to trim two nails, each within the first session.



Figure 6. Harris' Hawk on perch with good body posture while touching toe with Dremel.
Figure 7. Great-horned owl on perch looking at Dremel.

Conclusion

Providing the best care for our animals is always our top priority. Nail trims have become a weekly practice in our facilities as we continue to find new ways to make their lives better in our care. In addition to utilizing these perches with our toucans and birds of prey, we have also began desensitizing our parrots to the same perches. So far we have a few parrots trained on the perch and have found that we are able to get a better trim on the nail because the birds are applying more pressure. Training nail trims has been enriching for both staff and the birds. The birds have been enriched by the opportunity to learn a new behavior and seeing a bird of prey voluntarily allow his nails to be trimmed is greatly enriching to the staff. Giving all these birds, especially the birds of prey, the power of choice to be involved in a nail trim is so beneficial and rewarding. As primary handlers, we no longer need to take a withdrawal from our trust account with our birds to grab them up and are now able to build better, positive relationships because of the positive reinforcement throughout the process.