

CAPTURING PELICANS AND OTHER BIRDS THAT CAN BE LURED

by Lance Ferris

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“Rescuing the Australian Pelican: A Guide to the
Rescue and Rehabilitation of Pelicans & Seabirds”

by

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CAPTURING PELICANS

In 1992, I discovered that over one-third of the local pelican population in the mouth of the Richmond River at Ballina was hooked, entangled, crippled and suffering infection. Most of them could still fly. The challenge was to figure out how to capture them in order to alleviate their suffering.

In travelling throughout the coast to raise awareness about the plight of the pelicans, conducting workshops and establishing pelican rescue teams throughout Australia, other volunteers have risen to the challenge and added their ideas. The following is a compilation of these methods, which are used extensively and successfully by ASR volunteers.

Capture methods are listed in order of preference – that is, from those least likely to spook any other pelicans that may also require capture on the same day. Which strategy to use is a matter of your own judgment, and depends entirely on the attitude of the pelicans at hand. With every method, allow the bird some quiet time to settle down before you start working on it. Pelicans are very robust and generally tolerate first aid very well.

1) Beak-grab - the most efficient and preferred rescue method.

Quiet pelicans will approach within arm's length and luring them with a fish may allow you to grasp their beak. It should be noted that pelicans have very little biting power; the beak is designed to scoop, not bite. At worst, you may receive a scratch on the hand.

When a pelican is captured quietly and calmly by this method, the other pelicans will often be oblivious of the event and remain close at hand. As a result, once the captured bird has been attended to, the opportunity may remain to capture another one. It is not unusual for ASR members to capture up to five injured pelicans at one location in one hour!

Hold and wave the fish such that you have a couple of fingers free.

- When the pelican attempts to take the fish, hook those fingers firmly into the lower beak (mandible) then use your other hand to grasp the top beak up near the face.
- Use this hand to grasp the entire beak, freeing your other hand so that you can get the wings under control.
- Gently pull the bird towards you and manoeuvre yourself, so that the bird's side is up against your body,.
- Reach across and gather the far wing into the bird's body, the other wing folding against your leg.
- You can now lift the pelican up, with your right arm around the bird, supporting it under the belly, with wings tucked against your body and under your arm; with your left hand gently holding the beak. Always be careful to hold both the upper and lower beaks together; just a loose hold is all that is required, allowing the bird to move its head around.
- Move quietly away to minimise disturbance to the remaining birds.



2) Toss'n'Run: can be done alone

This is a very successful if the pelicans will come close (but not close enough for a beak-grab) **and you have a lot of fish**. The birds should be attracted as close as possible prior to the attempt. One or two steps away would be a satisfactory distance.

- The fish is thrown high in the air above a group of pelicans, several times, such that any other pelican but the target bird is likely to get the fish.
- As the pelicans look up, set your feet.
- On the 3rd or 4th toss – while the birds' attention is on the fish (looking up) – run towards your target bird and capture it. As you run, be prepared to pull up quickly.

The pelicans get very focused on the fish and rushing movement around them is perceived as other birds. Always secure the wings as quickly as possible, and then the beak – both upper and lower together.

3) Noose (foot snare): easier with a second person to assist. Costs ~\$5

May be used on Ibis and other large birds that can be lured, in addition to pelicans.

This has proven to be very successful when the target pelican is timid, and other methods of capture are not an option.

It can also be used on a boat ramp or grass, but you will need damp sand to cover and hold the line in place. If there are onlookers, you will need to explain what you are doing and reassure them about the process, as the capture can be dramatic and unnerving for the public.

A noose (around 50 cm diameter) is made up of heavy-duty 80-100lb fishing line and placed in a circular groove in the sand. It is attached to a pole held by the rescuer. A loop of line is created at the handle end of the pole as an added precaution against the operator dropping the pole (with bird attached). The pole needs to be held with the end resting on the sand as movement of the line in the wind will arouse the birds' suspicion.

Fish (or appropriate bait) is placed about a metre behind the noose (further than the beak can reach); the bird walks into the 'capture area'. A quick pull causes the noose to encircle the bird's leg, capturing the bird.

You will require:

- a 1.3-1.5 metre length of 15 or 20 mm electrical conduit – available any hardware store;
- 12 metres of (preferably) 80 lb fishing line;
- a 2 mm brass ring (available from tackle shops, usually in packets of 10, costing \$2-3);
- a drill and hacksaw.

Making the Pole

- Drill a hole right through one end of the pole, approx. 12 cms from the end (resulting in 2 holes opposite each other). This will form the handle.
- Thread line through the entire length of the conduit, starting at the end that doesn't have the holes drilled through it, and coming out the opening at the end near the holes.
- Thread the line through the holes and tie it off to the rod to form a loop for the hand, as shown.



- Attach the other end of the line to the brass ring.
- At about 1-2 cms from each end, drill a hole right through the conduit.
- Using the hacksaw, cut a V-shaped notch on both sides of each end down to where the holes are, to wind the fishing line on to when the noose is not being used.

For pelicans, big “frames” or fish are required for this method, otherwise the seagulls will carry off your bait. To distract seagulls, throw small pieces of offal to one side (but not too far away).

To set the noose:

- 1) Gouge a 50 cm circle in the sand with your fingers – close to the water’s edge.
- 2) Starting with the ring, lay the circle of line in this groove, covering lightly with sand as you go around (see right).
- 3) Gouge out the centre to form a shallow depression. This ensures that the bird’s foot lands below the line (otherwise when pulled, the noose may slip under the foot).
- 4) Use this sand to make several piles around the outside of the noose so that you can see from a distance where the boundaries are.
- 5) Lightly cover the first metre of line (towards you) with sand.
- 6) Place fish (or canned dog food for ibis) at least a metre closer to you from the noose (the combined reach of a pelican’s head and neck is about 1 metre, and an ibis about ½ metre).



Getting ready for the capture

- When you position yourself with the rod, ensure there is clear space behind you. As you jerk the rod backwards, you may need to step back to maintain your balance.
- Hold the rod so the end of it is resting on the ground. You do not want moving line to spook the birds. Have your helper hold the line so you can pull it firm (without disturbing the noose).
- Always ensure your hand is through the 'handle'. Do not leave the noose unattended once it is set.
- Have your helper throw fish and confirm when the bird's leg is in the noose; however, that person should avoid sudden movements or shouting.
- When the bird's leg is in the noose, pull the rod as fast as you can in a full 180° behind you – maintain tension until your helper has collected the bird.
- When you snare the bird, maintain tension on the line between you and the bird as the loop will loosen very easily.... STAY CALM.
- It is best if someone else can secure the bird and remove the noose from the leg; but **if you are alone**, maintain tension on the line as you work your way towards the bird, otherwise the line can loosen and the bird become free.

Do not pull the bird towards you.

CAUTION:

- i) It is sometimes difficult to convince onlookers that the noose technique doesn't injure the bird, and indeed there's a slim chance that it could (although we've never experienced it). If there are members of the public close by, you will need to explain to them beforehand what you are doing and what may happen.

ASR rescuers have used this method on over 200 pelican rescues, as well as dozens of ibis, and no injuries have been sustained. Smaller nooses have been used with lighter line for silver gulls, with the same successful outcome. However, silver gulls are generally more easily captured using the 'D net'.

- ii) Do not set the noose in an area where the bird can get into difficult amongst rocks.
- iii) Ensure there are no rocks or other trip hazards near the person holding the noose. As you jerk the rod backwards, you will very likely step backwards – ensure the coast is clear!

4) Leaping from shore or wharf– when no other method possible

Although most of these methods enable you to capture a pelican without getting wet, this method is a necessary fall-back position. If a pelican will only approach in the water, you may have to position yourself ready for a leap, taking care to be aware of hazards below.

This approach is most effective from a wharf or jetty, as pelicans least expect an “assault” of this kind and you can leap further from a height, but do not take any clothes off – the bird will immediately realize you are about to dive into the water.

You will need foot protection in case of rocks and oysters.

The longer you take to make your attempt at capture, the more suspicious the birds become and they may retreat out of reach.

Don't waste your fish.

There is nothing more frustrating than finally luring your prospective rescue into an almost impossible-to-escape position and then running out of fish. Throw just enough fish to any bird you **don't** want to capture, to keep them interested and promote some competition.

You may have to be very patient. Throw fish to every other bird but the target bird.

When a pelican takes fish, it usually retreats to the rear of the group (away from 'robbers') and not return until it has completely swallowed the catch. This will likely be the case if you feed your prospective target, AND if the fish is large, the bird may take a long time to swallow it. It may even be satisfied with that amount and not return at all!

Keep in mind that pelicans can move very quickly and your leap will require a thrust of about half a metre beyond where you would have expected the bird to be as you became airborne. In almost every case where I have landed on a pelican in the water, it has had sufficient time to turn away and raise its wings ready for flight.

When you feel that the bird is in capture position, which needs to be about half a metre closer than you think ... LEAP... and grab anything you can.

Make every effort to keep your eyes open as you land, thus ensuring a good catch and avoiding wing damage to the bird.

Hundreds of pelicans have been captured using this technique with no further injury being caused. The cushioning effect of the water combined with pelican's buoyancy lessens the impact.



When you feel you have a firm hold, restrain the beak (gently) with one hand, and gather the wings in with the other. Be aware that although they have no biting power, if the beak is free, the hook at the tip of the upper beak can cause cuts to the face and arms. Pelicans float very well and will comfortably support you if in deep water.

NOTE: Do not attempt this capture unless you are absolutely sure of success; a failed attempt may 'spook' the bird for weeks.

Ensure there are no submerged objects that may cause injury.

Be sure to keep the beak above the water line.

CAPTURING OTHER BIRD SPECIES THAT CAN BE LURED OR HABITUALLY FORAGE IN SPECIFIC AREAS

1) The 'Steeles Net': 2-3 person operation. Costs ~\$40. Most useful on beaches.

Designed by Mr Phil Steeles, retired fitter of Ballina, this capture method can be used for any shorebirds of habit, or any waterfowl that can be used, as well as pelicans.

This net can be adjusted to any size - to achieve up to 16 sq metres of capture area, as opposed to about 1 sq metre with the noose or hoop net. It can be adjusted to any size area to suit, at a distance from the rescuer that poses little or no threat to the bird. It is also what we consider a 'soft' capture, where the bird is not subjected to excessive trauma.

It is modelled on the action of a cannon net. The difference being, that the net is manually shot over the birds rather than being fired.

The Steeles Net is set in the sand, as close to the water as possible. The net is hidden by a light layer of dry sand. Fish is placed on the ground in the capture area. When the bird has entered the capture zone, the rescuer pulls the ropes. The net catapults into the air, behind the bird.

The bird's first instinct is to turn and run away from the rescuer, towards the water. However, by then, the net has travelled to a vertical position, effectively forming a wall between the bird and the water.

By the time the bird becomes aware of a threat, the net has travelled entirely over it, effectively trapping the bird underneath.

Design and Operation

For an average pelican capture, two 25mm PVC poles 2.5 metres long, are placed on the ground, about 4 metres apart, parallel to each other. Each pole is hinged onto a plate, which is pegged to the ground.

A lightweight net of about 4 cm sq mesh is attached to the rope (or smaller net if your targets are smaller birds), which is attached to the top of the poles, and pegged to the ground at the sides and rear. The net is made large enough, so that it is able to extend to the full 180° throw of the poles.

The poles with net attached are then laid flat on the ground. A 'trigger' rope is attached to the top of each pole, leading back up the beach to the rescuer. These ropes can be 25 m or more in length. One operator can pull both ropes from a single point.

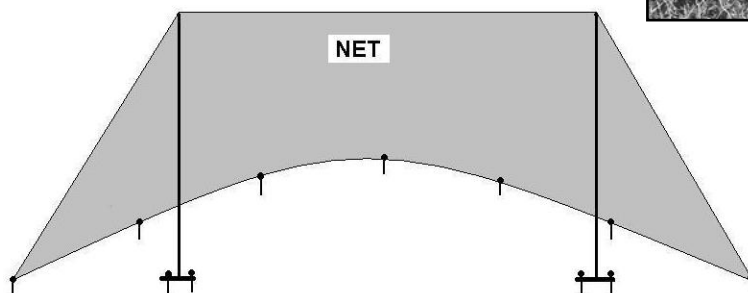
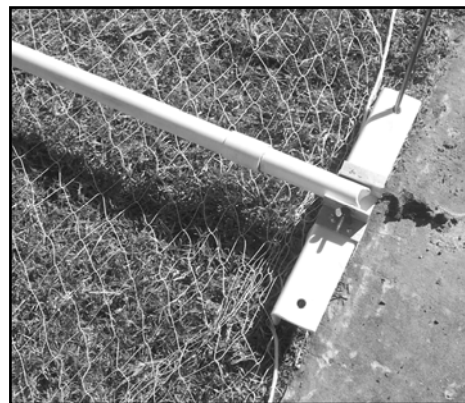
On beaches, the net, poles, and rope can be covered with a light layer of dry sand, so as to be inconspicuous to the birds. When the bird enters the capture zone, the ropes are quickly pulled. The poles rise from the sand, pulling the net up and over the bird.

The operation of the net is surprisingly fast. Before the birds have a chance to raise their wings for flight, they are under the net.



With a pull on the line or string attached to the top of the poles, they come forward of their horizontal (hidden) position, and over the top of the target bird or animal.

THE POLE HINGE
Two pegs, either side of the plate,
secure this hinge to the sand.



An artist's impression of the net pulled up into the vertical position.
Note the position of the pegs.

NOTES:

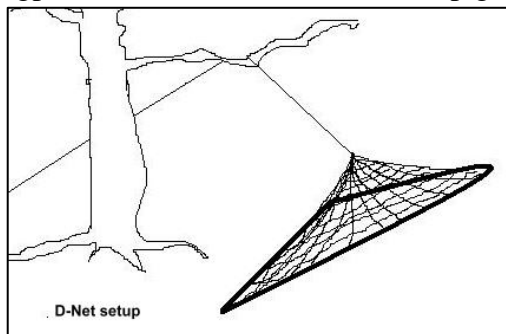
- It is preferable to make the net pegs in a u-shaped hairpin design, to minimise any net or rope entanglement.
- Ensure the net is of such a size that it fully covers the area of the travel of the poles.
- If you are likely trap more than 2 birds at once, you may need extra people to help.

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**2) 'D' NET: not an option in windy conditions; can be used alone. Costs ~\$25.  
Can be used anywhere but beaches.**

**Not suitable for pelicans – ideal for other species that can be lured:** silver gulls, ibis, magpies, butcherbirds, kookaburras, pigeons, ducks, etc. It can be made any size, but a



larger area increases the chances of a successful capture.

The net is set up where the bird visits regularly, under a tree or where the tethered line can be suitably operated, (e.g. clothes-line). Appropriate food/bait is placed under the net.

In some cases, it may take up to several days for the bird to accept the net as a non-

threatening structure, and gain enough confidence to walk under it. When it does, the string is released and the bird is captured.

**Operation:**

Place the net under a tree or other suitable location, with its straight edge on the ground, and the net leaning at about 45 degrees.

Hang the sash cord over a branch/clothesline or other structure, and stand some distance away holding the string.

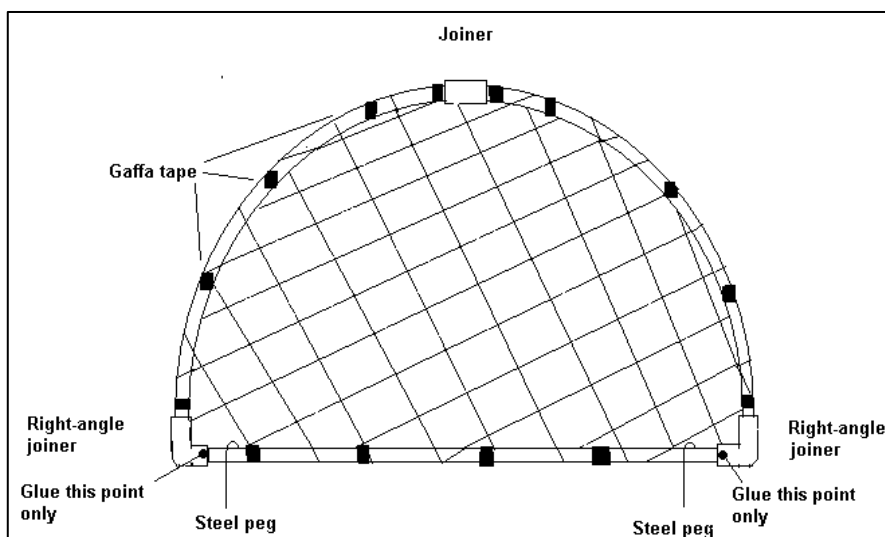
Place food under, and at the back of the net. When the bird enters the 'capture area', release the string.

The following instructions are for a net, which is approximately 2 metres wide along the straight edge. You will need:

- Two lengths of 20mm electrical conduit, 4 m long (each length has a flair at one end, which can be used as a joiner).
- One conduit straight joiner, and two right-angle corner joiners.
- About 3 sq. metres of black net with mesh-size about ~3 cm square.
- 50 metres of nylon sash cord.

**Construction:**

- Cut the conduit to length, fix the joiners and make the D-shape as indicated. Only glue **one side** of the joiners, so the net can be collapsed for transport.
- Lay the D onto the netting, and cut out the net slightly larger than the D.
- Open the joiners,



and thread the netting onto the D. Affix gaffa tape near the joiners to stop the netting sliding around the conduit.

- Attach the sash cord to the netting.

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