

## The Handling of Sick and Injured Large Wild Birds of Prey

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**ABSTRACT:** Many wildlife rehabilitators find the prospect of handling large birds of prey, intimidating and frightening.

For those carers who receive their first call out for a wedge tailed eagle (*Aquila Audax*) or sea eagle (*Haliaeetus leucogaster*) the prospect of attempting to handle one of these birds let alone catch one can be very daunting indeed.

In this session we will discuss the methods of handling large birds of prey, which will involve:

- Risks to the bird
- Risks to the handler
- Approaching and catching the raptor
- Five points of contact
- Catching the bird out of the pet pack
- Support and immobilisation
- What to do if the bird gets loose.

### **Objectives**

It is envisaged that wildlife rehabilitators involved in the capture and handling of large raptors and the on going care of these magnificent creatures, will feel more confident about handling raptors without injuring themselves or the birds after this session.

### **Risks to the Bird**


The most common situation in which a wedge tailed eagle is found injured, is

- A large open paddock on a farm or semi rural paddock.
- The side of a road near a dead kangaroo.

The main risk to a large raptor on a farm or in a paddock is getting hooked up on a barbed wire fence, running into it, or falling in a pot hole and breaking a leg, whilst you are chasing the bird to capture it. Another risk is also complete exhaustion and dehydration from being chased.

When a wedge tail is found on the side of a busy highway, the risks are fairly obvious. Firstly the possibility of the bird running into traffic whilst you are trying to capture it. Secondly, again exhaustion and dehydration from being chased and terror.

Both the above scenarios could further exacerbate the injury the bird has already been brought down with, creating a situation where the original injury is further damaged, beyond repair.



### **Risks to the handler**

When trying to capture a bird in a paddock, one of the main risks of injury to the carer is getting a twisted or broken ankle in a pot hole, or falling over hidden bits of metal in long grass. There is also a very good possibility of scaring a snake out from long grass. There is also a possibility of getting chased by cattle or horses.

Before arriving at the area where the injured bird is, speak to the person who has found the bird and ask them what sort of risks they think there might be whilst your attempting to catch the bird. The fact that this person has phoned you concerned for the animal's welfare means that they should be happy to let you know what is a possible danger to you.

So the main objectives you need to achieve when you reach the injured bird is to assess your surroundings. Eyeball the bird and assess what is surrounding the bird ie, barbed wire fences, metal sheets, farm animals, traffic, perhaps parent birds. If you assess the situation the animal is in thoroughly, you will be at less risk of injuring yourself or the already injured bird.

### **Approaching and catching the raptor**

This is where the fun begins.

It is always imperative to have two people present when catching an injured large raptor. Not only is the second person going to help capture and corner the bird, but, should you get injured, the other person can either help to handle the bird or get further equipment if needed.


Always have your large pet pack handy with the door open, with a newspaper and a towel on the bottom of the box and a large towel covering the top of the box, You do not want a distressed bird slipping and sliding around the bottom of a pet pack in it's own faeces or blood. You also need another large blanket or towel to throw over the bird.

Most people prefer to handle a large raptor with welding gloves, however we have found that handling a raptor with bare hands gives you a much better grip on the bird. This is a personal choice though.

The main objective is to corner the bird, so that its only means of escape is to come towards the two people trying to capture it. Approach the bird slowly holding at waist level your large blanket, ready to throw over the bird. The raptor will turn around and face you ready to strike at you with its talons or beak. The beak can give a fairly hard bite but it is extremely important to ensure that the feet of the bird are restrained.

As you approach the bird ensure the two of you are on either side of the bird one person can perhaps make small arm movements to keep the bird at bay, obviously don't wave wildly around, you'll terrify the poor bird. The bird will most likely slide down against what it is backed into and be panting and trying to look at a means of escape. It will be terrified, so the quicker you can do this the better.

With a fairly swift motion throw the towel over the bird making sure you get the head covered, this calms the bird down quite considerably as you have taken away its primary sense, its eyes. Follow the blanket throw over swiftly with kneeling beside the bird and pushing the bird firmly to the ground, thus trapping the feet. Slide your hand along the side of the blanket feeling for the upper part of the leg and then slide your hand down until you reach the ankle of the bird. Do the same on the other side and then lift and tuck the bird under your arm.



When you stand up with the bird the blanket should fall down over the bird covering its head and most of its body. ENSURE that the feet are pointing away from your body and then you can tuck the bird safely under your arm, restraining the bird, gripping both ankles, with one hand, pointed away from your body and the wings firmly pinned. They are powerful creatures so this hold is using the strongest part of your arm and body to immobilise the bird.

### **Five points of contact**

Now that you are holding the bird safely, you have what is known as five points of contact. The two wings the two feet and control of the head.

These five points of contact are extremely useful for examination of the injuries the bird has received. The person holding the bird can pull a wing out one at a time, whilst the second person examines the wing for any breaks or lesions. You can also pull one leg out at a time, ensuring that you maintain a firm grip on the ankle and that the person who is examining the leg does not stand in front of the bird, but to the side of the bird should it decide to strike out.

Once you have given the bird a cursory examination at the place it was found you can pop it in your already open pet pack, pushing the bird into the back of the box whilst gently removing the towel covering the bird. Then close the towel completely over the pet pack ensuring that the bird can not see out of the box, thus lessening its stress, in a dark confined space.

### **Catching the bird out of the pet pack**

This is one of the most difficult and dangerous things to do when handling large birds of prey.


Obviously the main reason for getting the bird out of the pet pack is for examination by your vet and for cleaning the animal out.

The most common injuries we have found in large raptors are broken limbs, legs or wings and poisoning. So your prime objective is to try not to further exacerbate these injuries, which is sometimes easier said than done.

Once again ensure that there are at least two people present when catching the bird out of the pet pack. The first thing to do is to ensure that the pet pack is sitting on a table or on a counter that is at a height where you can stand to catch the bird out of the pet pack. You can brace yourself with one foot back.

Arm yourself with a towel and cover the birds head. Whilst the animal can not see you firmly grasp one of the legs and pull it towards the front of the box, at the same time unbalancing the bird and pulling it over on one side, ensuring that the free leg is pinned to the bottom of the box. Quickly grasp the other leg and standing to the side of the box pull the bird part of the way out of the box, grasping both ankles firmly together and then transfer the legs into one hand. Put your free arm around the back of the bird pull the rest of the bird out of the box, getting it into the five point grip once again.

Once you have the bird firmly in your grasp remove the towel and replace the head covering with a hood. This ensures that the bird won't bite you and de-stresses the bird making for easier examination of the bird, without the risk of a towel slipping off the birds head and trying to maneuver the bird through a towel.



### **Support and immobilisation**

We have found that for broken limbs the best thing to do is have them pinned by your vet. With broken wings, we believe that they are best left un-bandaged unless there is a risk of rotation on the pin. In which case bandaging is only recommended for the maximum of four to six days, absolutely no longer than this, any longer and you risk “freezing” the joint and fusing the tendons and ligaments, so your raptor has no chance of being released back into the wild.

Confinement to a fairly small pet pack is also recommended, as this stops the raptor thrashing around and further injuring any broken limbs.

Obviously the raptor will also be getting any antibiotics and fluids required and we recommend putting the antibiotics into a mouse, twice daily.


### **What to do if the bird gets loose**

Hopefully you will not lose the bird where you have captured it in the field or on the side of the road, but if you do just use the same method again for capturing. It is preferable when you have caught the raptor to place it in a pet pack immediately, rather than examining it too much in the field, until you get more proficient at handling large raptors.

Wherever you are keeping the bird in its pet pack, please ensure that there are no extreme temperature variations or too much movement from humans and or animals. So preferably the pet pack would be in a dark quiet room, where if the bird escaped from your grasp whilst you were handling it, the raptor would still be contained so therefore much easier to recapture.

Should the raptor escape from your grasp you can recapture it using the method of cornering it and throwing the towel over its head, push the bird to the floor and run your hands along the blanket until you can feel the leg. Run your hand down to the ankle, grasp it firmly and repeat for the other leg. Ensuring the feet point away from your body. Gently push the bird into the back of the box, sliding the towel from around it as it runs into the back of the box.

Once again ensure that there are two people present, for your and the birds safety when you are handling the raptor. You do not want to get into a situation on your own, where the bird foots you and grabs your arm or leg. These large raptors can inflict serious and painful injuries. It would be best to try and have an experienced large raptor handler on hand the first few times that you capture these birds. It can be quite unnerving handling these powerful birds of prey for the first time and they do know when you're a novice. They pick up nervousness and hesitation very quickly.



### **Conclusion**

From the talk you can see that handling large birds of prey is risky and dangerous, particularly for first time handlers.

In wildlife rehabilitation we feel that handling large birds of prey is a necessary side of caring for birds of prey. There is nothing more intimidating and daunting than getting a call out for a large injured raptor, for the first time.

We feel that a situation is very likely to present itself, sooner or later, where, if you are caring for birds of prey you will be asked to handle a large raptor.

We recommend that you try to get some first hand experience in handling large raptors, with an experienced handler. If you are unable to do this, try to get in contact with carers in other states and talk things through with them. I know we would be more than willing to help you.

By giving carers clear guide lines on handling large raptors and providing advice and feed back and preferably practical experience. We are giving the best support and care for sick and injured large birds of prey, making it the ultimate goal to have more experienced large raptor carers out there so giving the raptors a better chance of rehabilitation and release back into the wild.

### **BIOGRAPHY:**

Stuart Payne and his wife Amanda have been active in the specialist field of raptor rehabilitation since 1993. They also both work full time in unrelated jobs.

They founded the WA Conservation of Raptors in 1995 and now conduct their rehabilitation from Brigadoon and have held a Regulation 16 Licence through then Conservation and Land Management and now Department of Environment and Conservation.

