



International Association of
Avian Trainers and Educators

POSITION STATEMENT

FLIGHT RESTRICTION

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BACKGROUND

Since birds were first brought into human care, flight restriction has occurred throughout history. Bird displays are quite popular worldwide with many countries interested in keeping birds outside of closed habitat spaces. This has led to the use of a variety of methods to prevent the bird from taking flight and entering the surrounding environment. Historically, many different methods have been used to restrict flight in birds when housed or handled outside any sort of enclosed habitat space, including the use of tethering equipment and the permanent or non-permanent physical alteration of the bird. Many methods of physical alteration of a bird have fallen out of use, including surgical alteration of the bones or tendons of the wing (practices like tenotomy, tenectomy, patagiotomy, and functional ankylosis). However common methods still in use to restrict flight in open-topped habitats or when handled outside of an enclosed habitat include wing-clipping (non-permanent) or pinioning (permanent).

For this position statement, IAATE defines **flight restriction** as *“the permanent or non-permanent alteration of a bird through modification of the bird’s body to restrict or remove the bird’s ability to fly.”*¹ For IAATE’s position on flight restriction through the use of equipment, refer to the IAATE Position Statement on Tethering and the Use of Jesses.

While IAATE acknowledges the existence of other methods of flight restriction through physical alteration, this position statement will focus on pinioning and wing-clipping.

For this position statement, IAATE defines **pinioning** as *“the surgical removal of part of the metacarpal bone and the phalanges of one wing of a bird.”*¹ IAATE defines **wing-clipping** as *“cutting the distal portion of some or all of the primary and secondary feathers.”*¹

POSITION

IAATE strongly believes flight restriction should be accomplished through the use of secure species-appropriate enclosures. For IAATE’s position on appropriate housing, refer to the IAATE Position Statement on Housing.

IAATE does not support the surgical alteration of a bird to permanently restrict flight as a default or common husbandry practice.

IAATE believes the use of flight restriction that physically alters a bird’s body should only be considered if it is non-permanent and allows a net benefit in terms of individual welfare.

IAATE recognizes that wing-clipping is a common method of restricting flight that, due to its non-permanence, must be maintained over time to remain effective, involving repeated restraint of an animal that may have welfare implications. If wing-clipping must occur, IAATE





encourages voluntary restraint or voluntary wing-clipping behaviors be trained using positive reinforcement to reduce the aversive conditions.

SUPPORT FOR POSITION STATEMENT

Welfare Concerns with Flight Restriction

There are a myriad of welfare concerns with flight restriction. Care should be taken to address each individual's welfare needs on a case-by-case basis. The British Veterinary Zoological Society states, *"Birds should be maintained in large, complex, fully enclosed aviaries that allow expression of a wide range of natural behaviours including flight. In cases where this is not possible and flight restriction is required, non-invasive methods of flight restriction should be considered, expert advice sought, and an ethical review process established (SSSMZP)."*² Additional research needs to be done to continue to study the potential changes in bird behavior and physical health due to permanent alterations to wings. There is a consensus in the current data that permanent or non-permanent changes to flight in birds:

- Can make them more vulnerable to physical injury due to less efficient flight and changes to bone and foot health from more time spent on the ground or compensating for uneven gait due to wing changes.²
- Can cause *"An increased vulnerability to injury or attack by conspecifics and/or ... other predators that can gain access into the enclosure."*³
- Can delay the release of endangered or threatened populations of birds due to alterations to their wings.

Welfare Concerns with Pinioning

Some species of commonly pinioned birds are long-lived and though their current housing situation may require flight restriction, this may not remain the case. Permanent removal of a piece of the wing can lead to disruptions in locomotion, breeding, and social displays.

The permanent removal of a functional part of an animal's body and the subsequent intentional limitation of their normal behavioral repertoire is not to be taken lightly. Frustration, anxiety, and physiological stress are the fallout associated with pinioning or amputation of a wing.² Through various methods of study, there is a consensus that chronic or acute pain can also be associated with the pinion site either through repetitive injury of the site or permanent long-term nerve damage or neuromas forming.² Permanent methods of flight restriction prevent future increases in welfare.

Welfare Concerns with Wing-clipping

Wing-clipping does not guarantee flight restriction and, when poorly executed or maintained, may lead to unintentional escape or injury/loss of the animal. Wing trimming can be dangerous to the bird when done poorly if care isn't given to how and where cutting of the distal portion of the wing feathers occurs. If wing-clipping is not maintained as feathers grow back, this can lead





to a bird attempting flight unsuccessfully and sustaining an injury or experiencing psychological stress.²

IAATE suggests serious consideration be given to the timing of any non-permanent flight restriction. If clipped before the critical development period of fledging the bird may struggle to learn to fly skillfully in later life if clipping is no longer required. "*...for some bird species playful flying is an essential part of their individual development... it is the essential form of locomotion in connection with searching for food and avoiding enemies*" (Munkar, 2012 [translated from original German text]).⁴

Conclusion

IAATE recognizes that pinioning is a current method of management for populations of birds that have significant SSP or conservation needs and the navigation of the necessary transition away from permanent surgical flight restriction is complex, difficult, and outside the scope of this position statement. IAATE also recognizes that wing-clipping is a common management method for exhibit and, in some cases, for ambassador birds in situations where the skill necessary to manage birds safely while also allowing free flight is lacking. IAATE encourages conversations regarding suitable housing for various bird species and the skill level of staff members managing them, be prioritized before animal acquisition to eliminate the need for pinioning or wing-clipping altogether. As the animal care field continually evolves and participants consider the management of bird populations through the lens of animal welfare and well-being, IAATE is confident that future discussions will involve the need to reduce or eliminate these methods of flight restriction when not medically necessary.

References:

¹AZA recommendations for developing an Institutional Flight Restriction Policy Dec 2013

²British Veterinary Zoological Society - Avian Flight Restraint 1-4 www.bvzs.org

³Oakland Zoo Avian Flight Restriction Policy (November 2021)

⁴Dollinger, P., et al. Making birds unable to fly – pros and cons. *Zool. Garden N.F.* (2014), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.zoolgart.2014.01.004>

Zoo Aquarium Association Australasia 1b.1 Guidelines - Avian Restraint

Secretary of State's Standards for Modern Zoo Practice [Secretary of State's standards of modern zoo practice - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](http://www.gov.uk)