

## Songbirds for Dummies

Michele Goodman, VMD, MHS, CWR  
FWRA – 2017

### Songbird Identification

- It's all about having good references!
  - NWRA Quick Reference, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition. 2006. Miller, E.A., Editor. National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association, St. Cloud, MN.
  - Nests, Eggs and Nestlings of North American Birds, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. 2005. Baicich, P.J., Harrison, C.J.O. Princeton University Press, NJ.
  - Passerine Fundamentals. 2016. Bowers, V. Self-Published, CA.
  - Birds of North America Online: <https://birdsna.org/Species-Account/bna/home>
- Observations for identification:
  - Size/weight
  - Color inside the mouth
  - Color and shape of the mouth edges (gape flanges)
  - Beak shape
  - Color and distribution of down
  - Skin color
  - Time of year
  - Nest characteristics (if known)
- Songbird identification can be challenging; it is often not essential to identify a bird to the species upon arrival. Remember that identification can be stressful, particularly for an unstable bird. Trying to classify the bird into a likely group, i.e. woodpeckers, warblers, finches, etc. can help to determine what nutrition needs to be provided.

### Intake and Physical Exam

- The intake period should be as short and stress-free as possible for any animal. Be organized, give the bird time to de-stress after intake.
- A visual examination should always be performed prior to restraining the animal; this can give you valuable information about what may be wrong with the bird, what needs to be dealt with immediately, etc.
  - A visual exam should include an assessment of the birds' eyes (open, closed, discharge?), it's body position and posture, the feather condition, the foot position, the wing position, and any droppings. Watch to see how the animal is breathing. Is there any slight indication of a wing droop or lameness? All of these things should be assessed prior to restraint.
- After a visual exam, a plan should be formulated to address the birds' immediate needs for warmth, fluid or for other emergency interventions (stop bleeding, perform humane euthanasia if indicated, etc.). It is okay if a full physical exam cannot be performed at the same time in the event that the bird is not stable. Birds that do not seem stable for an exam should not be fully examined until their condition improves, i.e. after some fluids and pain medications as the stress of the exam can push them over the edge. It is also okay to perform a physical exam in several stages.

- Initially birds are often set up in an incubator where they can be provided with supplemental heat and carefully monitored. The setup should be simple, i.e. nestlings should be placed in an artificial nest, fledglings can have some low perches, etc. Remove young birds from any nest structure that they arrived in and start fresh.
- Once the bird is stable, a physical exam should be performed efficiently but thoroughly. The order of the steps is not important as long as the bird is assessed completely. Important components of a physical exam are to obtain a weight, assess hydration, look in the mouth and ears, examine the feathers and examine the skin. Look for blood, parasites, fractures or wounds.
- Birds should be assigned a unique identification number; this often requires that a band be attached. This band will have to be monitored frequently to ensure it is not causing any trauma or constriction, particularly in growing patients.
- Following the physical exam, a plan should be devised that includes:
  - Hydration plan
  - Feeding plan – diet selection, amount and frequency
  - Housing plan
  - Monitoring plan
  - Additional planning is required for injured or debilitated birds that may include consulting with your sponsoring veterinarian to determine a strategy for wound or fracture management, diagnostic tests needed, etc.

## Husbandry

- Nutrition
  - Diets for songbirds are complicated – each individual species has unique requirements and these requirements differ by season, life stage and by health status
  - While there are many options for songbird diets, it is essential that songbirds are fed a properly formulated diet (where the nutrient analysis has been performed and all ingredients are specified). Formulated diets can be augmented by insects, which themselves must be fed a balanced diet. Insect-only diets are another option to consider (see Bowers, 2016 for information on how to feed an insect-only diet).
    - Formulated diets should be designed for passerines – NOT for psittacines (doves being the exception)
  - Two primary formulated diet options:
    - FoNS® diet – see separate handout by Winn and Finke, 2016
    - Mazuri® Nestling Handfeeding Formula
  - In addition to providing appropriate nutrition to birds, the nutrition must be provided in the correct way, i.e. by using appropriate sized syringes, by keeping feeding implements clean and by keeping the birds feathers clean
  - Whenever possible, natural food items should be incorporated into the diet (i.e. fruit for cedar waxwings)
  - Hydration status must be monitored
  - Feeding Intervals
    - Take cues from the birds... these are general recommendations
    - Hatchlings: every 15-30 minutes

- Add digestive enzymes to the formula for the first 3 days to replicate cloacal drinking (when adding enzymes, this should be done 15-20 minutes before feeding; unused diet should then be discarded)
  - Nestlings: every 30-60 minutes
  - Fledglings: wean from heat source; will start to pick up food on their own; think about transitioning to outdoor housing. Feeding interval every 60-90 minutes depending on species
  - Injured Adults: may require gavage feeding with formula depending on their condition. Birds should be weighed frequently so that the gavage schedule can be changed depending on need
    - Food presentation should compensate for injury
    - Natural food items should be offered whenever possible
- Nutrition for Doves and Pigeons
  - These birds will not gape for food and require gavage feeding 4-5 times daily
  - In general, pigeons and doves are fed a diet designed for neonatal psittacines; there is a replacement diet for Crop Milk that is also available through Winn and Finke, Avian Haven.
- Housing Strategies
  - There are a variety of ways to house songbirds
    - Incubators (intensive or neonatal care)
      - Ensure that both temperature and humidity are provided
    - Small indoor habitats (restricted/limited movement)
    - Indoor flight cages/rooms (limited movement)
    - Outdoor flight cages for pre-release conditioning (unlimited movement)
  - Housing means much more than a cage – have to factor in:
    - Substrate, materials
    - Perches and other cage furniture
    - Food presentation
    - Water presentation
    - For outdoor cages – have to think about predator proofing, seasonal considerations, escape proofing, as well as cleaning, disinfection and drainage considerations
  - Individuals (particularly young birds) require additional considerations to ensure appropriate behavioral development
    - Mirrors
    - Feather duster or stuffed animal(s)
    - Sound machine
  - Consider natural history when designing housing structures
    - Open nests for young that normally utilize open nests
    - Cavity nests for cavity-nesting species
    - Mock chimneys for chimney swifts