Deflighting zoo birds and its welfare considerations

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Abstract

For over a century the practice of deflighting has taken place in zoological collections in order to ensure birds remain in open-topped enclosures. Over time, efforts have been made to improve or develop new (surgical) techniques, reduce risk of complications during deflighting and minimise stress and pain during the procedure. However, increased public interest in issues of animal welfare has coincided with a questioning of the practice of removing a bird’s ability to fly. The ensuing debate, which continues to progress among a variety of differing stakeholders, has led to various legislative adjustments across a number of countries. Despite significant legislation, the dialogue has been both subjective and highly emotive. A plethora of opinions exist as to why deflighting should be outlawed, why it is necessary, or how it has the potential to improve a bird’s living conditions. However, most are based on assumption or issues unrelated to welfare. To the authors’ knowledge, to date, no scientific data have been published on the welfare implications of deflighting for the commonly deflighted bird species, such as waterfowl, flamingos (Phoenicopteridae), pelicans (Pelecanidae), storks (Ciconiidae), cranes (Gruidae) and herons (Ardeidae). The aim of this study is to present an overview of the relevance of deflighting to zoo husbandry, the species primarily affected, the techniques currently in use, the legality in differing countries and the extent of scientific knowledge as regards potential ethological and welfare concerns. An urgent need for evidence-based studies is highlighted, to further inform this practice at a species-specific level.

Keywords: animal welfare, birds, deflighting, pinioning, wing-clipping, zoo

Introduction

In zoological institutions, most of the commonly displayed bird species are kept in aviaries that allow behaviour primarily associated with the avian class to be performed, notably flight (J Dekker, EAZA, personal communication 2016). Notwithstanding those species naturally unable to fly, only a small minority of bird species are commonly in open display under flight restraint (Dollinger et al 2014). Flamingos (Phoenicopteridae), pelicans (Pelecanidae), geese (Anseriformes), cranes (Gruidae) and other species regularly undergo deflighting throughout the world (Hesterman et al 2001; Bennett & Baumgartner 2015; J Dekker, EAZA, personal communication 2016), leading many to question whether or not deflighting is compatible with the animals’ welfare and, if so, under which circumstances.

According to the Zoos Directive of the European Union (Council Directive 1999/22/EC), zoological institutions are obliged to accommodate “their animals under conditions which aim to satisfy the biological and conservation requirements of the individual species” as well as to prevent “the escape of animals in order to avoid possible ecological threats to indigenous species”. A number of zoo representatives are of the opinion that in certain instances and for certain bird species, both goals can best be achieved through the use of deflighting procedures (Hesterman et al 2001; Dollinger et al 2014). As a contrast some authors are critical of surgical alterations (Tyson 2014), considering deflighting to be a relic from a bygone era (Bračko & King 2014) that, indeed, should even be made illegal (Schmidt & Jäger 2015). Furthermore, this debate extends beyond zoological institutions to include each individual country’s individual legal regulations which show wide variation, ranging from prohibition of any deflighting procedure to their unequivocal permission (see Table 1). Additionally, flight restraint — pertaining in particular to the practice of pinioning — is subject to increasing criticism from animal rights organisations declaring it to be a violation of animal welfare (CAPS 2013; PeTA Deutschland eV 2017).