

## Why tube-feed?

### Subject: rehabilitation of some fish-eaters

Perhaps encouraged by the tube-and-hydrate component of the washing protocols that were instituted and publicized during the Exxon Valdez oil-spill, I have noticed some rehabilitators automatically force-feed aquatic birds by tube. I realize that Robin and I have very little experience with aquatic birds compared to coastal centres, but we have never tube-fed any of our fish-eaters (actually, almost never tube-fed any birds) simply assuming that whole fish, selected by the bird when it liked, provided both satisfaction and nutrition at the same time.

When we faced our first White Pelican and our first Northern Gannet (both very, very rare here—presumed to be post-fledging dispersement) we phoned experts and were told *Tube them! Hydrate them!* We looked at them doubtfully. It seemed so unpleasantly aggressive when they were calmly



***White Pelican snatches up a tossed fish***



***Northern Gannet grabs breakfast out of a bowl. Left foreground is dinner from the night before***

paddling about, drinking when they wished and eating all the fish we could provide—both were enjoying 1500-1600g of fish most days and gaining weight rapidly. We shrank from such enforcement. Both birds did very well and were sent to U.S. centres where they were ultimately released.

In the fourteen days with us, the pelican gained over 1000g by choice, often snatching fish straight from our hands. We were

disappointed to hear later that the gannet, at 2850g now 850g heavier by *his* choice than on admission twelve days before, had been kept and tubed for some weeks before being freed. Sounds somewhat like the forced-feeding of geese to make *paté de foie gras* (pathologically fatty liver.) One would think that the reduced stress on the bird and reduced work of the worker would together count for a lot. Surely both fish-eaters would have continued fishing and gaining on their own in the ocean? Is there proof that they do not survive otherwise?



*Great Blue Heron snatches a fish from a dish.  
Photographed from a blind*



*Starving Bald Eagle digs into a fish corpse  
gripped in his foot*

This hands-off approach is not just ours. In an impressive TV documentary on the SANCOB rehabilitation centre in South Africa that specializes in oiled birds (and has 75% success rate, meaning *the released birds lived more than two years* and up to 20 years, banded and wing-tagged for proof) we saw that they used simple and natural approaches with their gannets. Gangs of gannets were simply tossed dead fish which they eagerly snatched in midair, their heads swinging from side to side like a crowd of tennis-watchers. The only birds they had to force-feed were penguins, which apparently never eat voluntarily in captivity, and for them they pushed down pilchards about 8-10 inches long. Again, they did not tube-feed.



*Osprey grazes peacefully on a large fish*

In our green beginnings 27 years ago, we felt pressured to conform to more experienced views and we did tube-feed a few of our early birds. We hated it. The birds hated it. It only took a bit of experimenting to find out that choice worked best all around, and after that, we rarely have had to resort to it.

Among the fish-eaters we neither tubed nor force-fed and who chose and ate their fish willingly were Bald Eagles, ospreys, cormorants, mergansers, some other fish-eating ducks, three species of grebes, two species of loons, kingfishers, several species of gulls, and five species of the heron family (many of gulls and herons ate dead mice too).

*Cormorant rip on my arm. I still have both of these scars*



*Loon bite (same arm, same day!)*



Oh, and another weather-displaced rarity—Ontario's only living Atlantic Puffin (December, 1985): a crabby little critter to care for, we found, who only ate by snapping at minnows from fingers (ow!) or forceps. It was later flown to a Newfoundland centre for release where he finally died, but he left here a fat, feisty little tub!



*Atlantic Puffin juvenile snaps at minnow offered with forceps*



*Green Heron catches a live minnow in a deep pan indoors*

Some of these birds, such as healthy-feeling cormorants and loons, can strike painful defensive bites. This is often a sign that they can be released immediately.

As for the loons, it never crossed our minds to tube-feed them. They chose from mixed species in a pail or pan, and pursued bait shiners in their pool. Like all birds, their expression of appetite gave us an indication of their health, and what species they chased alive or choose dead from a dish, how much and how often, taught us a lot. For example, they always preferred slender fish to deep ones.

Fresh fish are often difficult to get in our area, but the loons accepted thawed herring, even straight from our hands. If they didn't eat, then they were either already well-fed, strong and wild to get out, or they were telling us they were too ill and they knew better than we about the state of their insides. Post-mortems have borne us out.



*Common Loon (in remigial moult) chases a large chubb in a small outdoor pool*

We see our responsibility as offering the freshest and most tempting fish, taking note of how they react and how much they eat, and avoiding the stressful indignities of chasing, grabbing and handling as much as possible.



*Day's ration: 860 grams of frozen herring for a female loon*



*McFish to go*

*Watch for another column next month!*

*Kit Chubb, R.N.*