

Pinioning birds in English zoos

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# Mutilated

for your viewing pleasure



**CAPS**

Captive Animals' Protection Society

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In zoos and wildlife parks up and down the country, thousands of birds stand in large open enclosures, serenely surveying their surroundings. Flamingos pick their way delicately through shallow water and cranes stand on slender legs watching the world go by. The occasional flurry of wings flapping is seen but, strangely, none of the birds take flight.

Are these birds simply content with their surroundings, choosing to stay conveniently within the boundaries of the zoo? Do they fly away at times and simply choose to return, safe in the knowledge they will find food in abundance and familiar flock mates? Is it a deep connection to their keepers that stops them from taking to the air? Or is it something else that holds these birds in the unnatural environment of a UK zoo?

**Look closely as wings are spread and you will find the answer...**



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**At just a few days old, thousands of birds in UK zoos have the end of one wing deliberately severed.**

- These birds will never fly.
- These birds will never be released to the wild.
- These birds have the gift of flight taken away from them forever.

"The process of pinioning involves the cutting of one wing at the carpal joint, thereby removing the basis from which the primary feathers grow. This makes the bird permanently incapable of flight because it is lopsided" *(Rees, 2011)*

The Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, a conservation charity which operates nature reserves, some of which have a zoo licence, admits to pinioning all of their captive wildfowl and flamingos. In order to gauge numbers of individuals affected by this practice, we analysed the most recently available animal stock lists for the five Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust centres which hold captive birds under zoo licensing rules in England and found 5,663 individual birds pinioned in these zoos alone. Exact numbers of birds subjected to the permanently disabling mutilation in all of the 208 zoos in England have not been established to date.

## How can the zoo industry justify pinioning?

Birds' wings have been legally mutilated by the zoo industry for decades but it is illegal to carry out the same practice on farmed birds. It stands to reason, therefore, that there should be a strong justification to allow pinioning to continue in zoos.

We explored a number of possible explanations:

### CONSERVATION...?

One of the overriding claims made by zoos in order to justify holding any animal captive is that of conservation benefit for the species as a whole. Indeed, a paper published by the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (BIAZA) on flight restriction (including pinioning) of birds in zoos recommends that a cost/benefit analysis "should be carried out in each case before any form of flight restraint is performed". This assesses the welfare of the birds against the "potential conservation value of captive populations". Flight restraint is permitted if conservation benefits outweigh welfare concerns.

As a 2013 CAPS study of a small sample of 20 randomly selected zoos found the practice of pinioning to be widespread and the individuals subjected to it numbering in their thousands, you might expect to find that the conservation benefit is significant; however, on analysis, this is clearly not the case.

Zoos often point to captive breeding programmes as beneficial to species conservation, arguing that they are creating a "reserve" population which can be released into the wild at a later date. In spite of these claims, evidence has shown that pinioned flamingos, for example, have little breeding success.

These reproductive problems do not appear to be limited to a few anecdotal cases as, according to the American Zoo Association (AZA), "it has been shown that reproduction is severely hindered by pinioning due to the male's difficulty in balancing himself during copulation. Full-wing flamingos have better balance, whereas pinioned male greater flamingos more regularly fall off when mating".

Flamingos are commonly kept in zoos up and down the UK and make up 14% of all pinioned birds in the five Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust centres licensed as zoos in England (800 individuals), for example. But flamingos are not the only species whose reproductive capacities are adversely affected by pinioning. Pinioned male cranes have also been

## Which birds are pinioned?

Birds of the following orders, kept in open enclosures, and who would likely fly off if their flight was not restricted, are most likely to be pinioned:

- *Anseriformes*:  
Waterfowl (ducks, geese, swans)
- *Ciconiiformes*:  
Herons, storks and relatives
- *Gruiformes*:  
Cranes, rails and relatives
- *Pelecaniformes*:  
Pelicans and relatives
- *Phoenicopteriformes*:  
Flamingos

Thousands of birds belonging to these species are held in zoos in the UK. Thousands of birds have been subjected to this practice.

observed to have difficulties keeping their balance when mating.<sup>1</sup>

Even if breeding were successful it would appear that the vast majority of pinioned birds are not even threatened in the wild; a revelation which casts further doubt on any suggestion that this practice is carried out for conservation purposes. In fact, analysis of all pinioned birds in the five Wildfowl and Wetland Centres in England with zoo licences shows that a huge 86% of pinioned individuals belong to species which are not threatened in the wild. This represents 4,849 birds in these five zoos alone. If these numbers were extrapolated to the zoos in England that currently hold captive birds, it is likely that this figure will increase significantly.

Finally, and perhaps most obviously, it is difficult for zoos to make any claims that birds are being kept for conservation purposes when it is clear that a bird that cannot fly is a bird that will never be released into the wild. Pinioned birds are often, quite literally 'sitting ducks' - they would simply would not survive outside of captivity.

**Conservation claims, it would seem, offer no justification for pinioning.**

### WELFARE...?

A common excuse given by zoos for pinioning is that it allows birds to be kept in large, open enclosures rather than in smaller, confined aviaries. One industry consultant suggested: "The difference between pinioning and not pinioning is the difference between access to, and the relative freedom, of several acres of an islet spotted lake or confinement to an aviary pond".<sup>2</sup> This statement makes the somewhat contradictory suggestion that the amputations are carried out for the bird's own welfare benefit.





Flamingos are evolved to fly but pinioned birds are denied flight forever

Whilst birds having access to large open enclosures may be pleasing to zoo visitors who are impressed with the space and apparent freedom that the birds are provided, meaningful use can hardly be made of any environment by an animal whose most important locomotive adaptation (flight), has been permanently removed.

In addition, to suggest that the only alternatives to large open enclosures are small confined aviaries is misleading, at best. Notwithstanding CAPS' fundamental opposition to zoos, large and complex aviaries are possible. Indeed, one zoo which has invested in an alternative to pinioning is South Africa's Birds of Eden, which claims to be "the world's largest free-flight bird aviary" at 50 metres high, covering 23,000 square metres of forest, 70% of it indigenous. It houses more than 3,500 birds of more than 280 species. Many are ex-pets who are rehabilitated before release into the aviary, or come from other zoos, including "birds such as the cranes, flamingos and some of the ducks have been subjected to the cruel practice of pinioning".<sup>3</sup>

It is clear then, that the issue is not one of zoos being forced to choose between the lesser of two evils in the form of either large open top enclosures (and pinioned birds) or cramped aviaries, but rather a reluctance on the part of the zoo industry to invest in closed enclosures of sufficient size to allow flight.

This point was alluded to by zoo consultant, David Dickinson, who noted that: "The alternative [to pinioning] would be the building of aviaries of exceptional size which would in most cases be cost prohibitive". Judging by the marked absence of these types of aviaries on zoo sites in England, it seems that the principle of providing large aviaries has been dismissed out of hand by the industry at large on grounds of cost.

**As with conservation then, it would seem that claims that pinioning is carried out for welfare purposes are wholly unconvincing.**

## LEGAL REQUIREMENTS...?

One of the most common arguments presented in favour of pinioning relies on the fact that it is against the law in the UK to allow non-native species to escape into the wild and that to do so is an offence under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981.

It was this point which was put forward by the RSPB during the passage of the Animal Welfare Act 2006 and was the reason provided by zoo staff when the practice was queried during the course of the wider CAPS study. The argument is that the outlawing of pinioning would result in the potential for accidental release of non-native wildlife. This, it is maintained, could have a damaging impact on the local environment and native species.

The major focus of attempts to prevent further problems caused by the release/escape of non-native species concerns the Ruddy duck (*Oxyura jamaicensis*), a North American species which has become established in the wild in the Western Palaearctic (Europe, North Africa, northern and central parts of the Arabian Peninsula, and part

**"The issue of pinioning with regards to the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust is that we want to actually bring people close to birds close to wildlife, particularly young children".**

*Martin Spray, CEO of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust*



Thousands of baby birds in UK zoos have the ends of their wings severed

**"It is only with birds that we, as a community, have accepted mutilation of an animal to keep it in captivity."**

*Bjarne Klausen, Vice Director of Odense Zoo*

of temperate Asia) following its introduction to the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust and other private wildfowl collections in the UK in the 1940s. The UK population was thought to be the main source of birds immigrating to Spain and mating with, and hybridising, the globally endangered White-headed duck (*Oxyura leucocephala*), threatening its extinction.<sup>4</sup> Since the early 1990s, plans have been in place to eradicate the ruddy duck in the Western Palaearctic, leading to additional concerns about the release of other non-native bird species from zoos.

During formal considerations in 2004 on whether or not pinioning should be permitted, it seemed that this factor was also a concern within Government. The Head of Policy for the Animal Welfare Bill, Henry Hoppe, suggested at the time: "On the issue such as pinioning, we also have to consider not only the welfare of the bird but also the possible impact on society if you do not pinion, and, in the case of pinioning, there is the risk of non-native species being released and you get into the ruddy duck syndrome".

Whilst these arguments appear to have some substance in that the potential introduction of invasive species is a genuine conservation concern, it does not explain why amputation is deemed a solution for birds and yet not for any of the other hundreds of species of animals held captive in zoos around the UK. Zoos have a responsibility to ensure that none of the animals held by them escape into the local environment but with no other species is it suggested that amputation of limbs is the way in which to achieve this.

This point is made concisely by Bjarne Klausen, Vice Director of Odense Zoo, who said: *"It is only with birds that we, as a community, have accepted mutilation of an animal to keep it in captivity."*

**So, whilst the concern for release of invasive species is an important consideration, it is hard to accept that mutilation is the best solution.**

## ENTERTAINMENT...?

The CEO of the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust, Martin Spray, offered a frank presentation to Parliament during the passage of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. His justification appears to be based on little more than the entertainment value of getting up close to wildlife, saying: *"The issue of pinioning with regards to the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust is that we want to actually bring people close to birds close to wildlife, particularly young children"*.

**Animals in their thousands suffering the partial amputation of a limb in order to allow us to get up close to wildlife seems a high price to pay to simply satisfy our curiosity.**

## TRADITION....?

Finally, the approach employed by the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums (then known as the Federation of Zoological Gardens of Great Britain and Ireland) during the same lobbying process to see pinioning remain legal was simply that the procedure was a "routine management practice". It would seem that there was an element of tradition that was considered important by the zoo community and which, in and of itself, should be considered as a reason to maintain the practice.

**CAPS believes that arguing "tradition for tradition's sake" offers no excuse to subject birds to permanent flightlessness.**

## Victory for the zoo industry signals countless more generations of flightless birds

Conservation, welfare, legal requirements, entertainment and tradition have all been put forward as reasons to continue to deny flight to countless future generations of birds in UK zoos. Many of the arguments were put forward as part of a concerted effort to lobby Government to ensure that the practice could continue for years to come.

Given the weakness of the arguments presented when balanced against the loss suffered by the birds in question, it is perhaps surprising that the combined efforts of the various groups saw success for the zoo industry following the enactment of the Animal Welfare Act 2006. The prize in their campaign was delivered by the inclusion of pinioning in the **The Mutilations (Permitted Procedures) (England) Regulations 2007**. This means that it can still be practiced legally in the England and Wales and since the passage of these regulations, thousands more birds have had their wings cleaved in UK zoos.



## One of the zoo industry's best-kept secrets

Despite strenuous lobbying on the issue at the time, no public campaign was launched by the zoo industry to ask zoo visitors to get behind the practice. In fact, there is remarkably little information available on this issue outside of the official records of the presentations given by the various organisations to Government in 2004. Both the World Association of Zoos and Aquariums and the British and Irish Association of Zoos and Aquariums have published 'position statements' on the issue of flight restraint but neither of those position statements are available in the public domain.

Furthermore, and despite the 5,663 birds currently pinioned within their English centres, a search on the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust's website for the term pinioning sends back no results, and a search of other bird zoo websites throws up the same response.

Worryingly, even when the issue is raised directly, it appears that staff in zoos where birds are pinioned have limited understanding of the practice. During the 2013 study, the CAPS investigator spoke to staff at two zoos during visits and asked them about pinioning. At one, a staff member stated that all non-native birds in open enclosures had to be pinioned by law and that every such bird at the zoo was therefore pinioned. At the other, a volunteer guide stated that the birds were 'wing clipped' and that he had needed to ask someone else this himself as he had seen birds clipped (actually pinioned) and didn't know what it was. This strongly suggests that at least some staff and volunteers are poorly informed which, in turn, means that zoo visitors are given misleading, and sometimes false, information.

## It's time to end the mutilation

Notwithstanding all of the above there is a very simple solution to combating the purported factors which necessitate pinioning. That is, if it is not possible for zoos to maintain non-native birds in captivity without slicing off parts of their limbs to do so, and they are not willing to spend money to provide the birds with spacious enclosures, then those species should not be kept in captivity at all. This obvious solution does not seem to have been put forward for serious consideration at any point in time. CAPS believes that this solution must now be brought forward in the strongest terms as action is sought to outlaw pinioning in the UK.

**CAPS firmly believes that there can be no justification for permanently disabling any animal of any species in order to hold him or her captive for our entertainment. It is vital that we work to see this outdated, cruel and entirely unnecessary suffering outlawed in this country, as it already has been in Estonia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Netherlands, Norway and Switzerland.<sup>5</sup>**

## What you can do...

- **WRITE to your MP** to ask that they support the call to ban pinioning in UK zoos.
- **DONATE to the campaign.** Your donation today will help us to campaign at local and national levels to put an end to this cruelty.
- **GET INVOLVED in peaceful demonstrations.** Got a zoo near you? Get in touch with us to receive free campaigning literature to use on information stalls or demonstrations. We can help you organise your demo – just let us know if you need advice or help. Be aware that some wildlife parks may not promote themselves as zoos but may hold pinioned birds. Ask members of staff before you visit. If they pinion, please inform them why you won't be visiting.
- **CONTACT your local zoo** to find out if they pinion birds. Pinioning is widespread but rarely talked about by the zoo industry. Get in touch with your local zoo to find out if they pinion birds. Ask them how many birds are subjected to this practice and let us know what you find out.
- **BOYCOTT nature reserves, parks or other outdoor centres that hold captive wildlife** Some zoos promote themselves as nature reserves or other types of outdoor centre. If you are unsure whether a reserve or centre that you would like to visit holds captive animals, call ahead and find out. Let them know why you won't be visiting if they do hold captive wildlife.



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## References

- <sup>1</sup> Sawyer, R.C.J. 1997. Twenty five years at Cobham. *Avicultural Magazine* Vol. 103 No. 2 (1997)
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