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Dear Minister

PINIONING OF ORNAMENTAL BIRDS

I am writing on behalf of the Scottish Animal Welfare Commission to express the Commission's concern regarding the continuing practice of pinioning ornamental birds (that is to say, those which are non-native to the UK). Pinioning is carried out with the intention of rendering the bird permanently flightless. It involves the removal of the metacarpal bone and the phalanges of one wing. Pinioning is therefore an invasive procedure involving the surgical amputation of the distal (end of) wing, cutting through both soft tissues and bone in order permanently to remove the primary flight feathers. Without these, the bird is unable to fly. Typical species that are commonly pinioned are non-native species of waterfowl including ducks, geese, swans, pelicans, cranes, storks and flamingos, although exotic species of pheasant may also commonly be pinioned. In some cases even UK native species of birds in captive breeding establishments may be pinioned to allow them to be kept in open-topped enclosures without being able to fly away.

The Commission is mindful that it is illegal to release or allow to escape from captivity any animal to a place outwith its native range and cognisant of the Scottish Government's three-stage hierarchical approach to managing the threat posed by non-native species: prevention, rapid response, (eradication), and control and containment (Non-Native Species: Code of Practice (2012)). Nevertheless, the Commission believes that there are alternative, more humane, methods of avoiding ornamental birds escaping from captivity; for example, netting the enclosure or wing-clipping. The latter procedure is neither invasive nor painful, involving only the trimming of the bird's flight feathers, and is reversible (that is the feathers can re-grow and the bird is then able to fly again).

In contrast, the process of pinioning is permanent and surgical, giving rise not only to immediate welfare issues arising from the pain caused, but also long-term welfare considerations such as chronic neuropathic pain (due to neuroma formation at the amputation site), haemorrhage from trauma to the wound site, and fundamentally compromises a bird's ability to express its natural behaviour as its flight capabilities are permanently removed (Hesterman et al., 2001; Peng et al., 2013; Mellor et al.,

2018) or the ability of the male to mount the female during mating may be hindered (Mooney et al. 2023). Behaviour is, of course, one of the Five Domains widely used to assess the state of an animal's welfare (Mellor, 2017). In addition, removal of the wing tip at a young age leads to a reduction in the development of the wing (pectoral) muscles on the same side through disuse. An example of the typical amputation site is given in the diagram below.

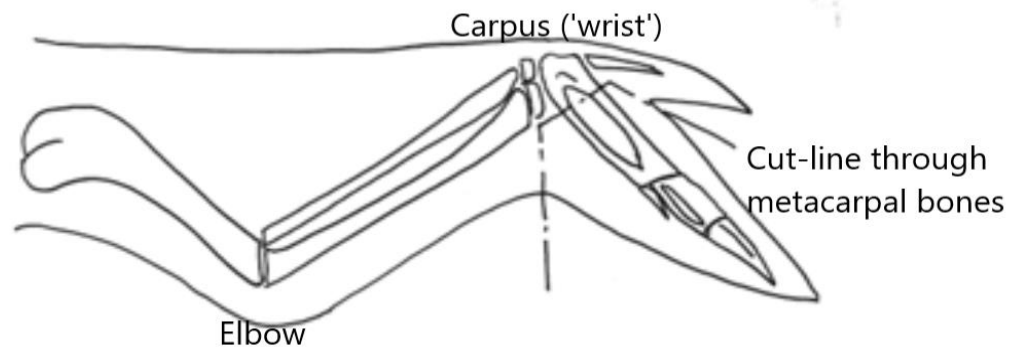


Diagram of the bones and skin of a bird's wing without feathers. The broken dotted line shows the typical amputation site of the wing to carry out pinioning, passing through the bones of the bird's equivalent of the palm of the hand.

Numerous other similar surgical techniques are now viewed as unnecessary mutilations and banned on the grounds of welfare under s.20 of the Animal Health and Welfare (Scotland) Act 2006 (e.g., ear cropping of dogs; tendon firing of horses; declawing of cats). Of these procedures, the declawing of cats is perhaps the most akin to the level of pain likely to be encountered by pinioning as both procedures involving the cutting of bone, although declawing of cats was historically carried out under general anaesthetic, whereas pinioning is often carried out without anaesthetic or the benefit of analgesia.

While s.20 of the 2006 Act prohibits mutilations in general, the Scottish Ministers may exempt certain procedures by regulations and pinioning of ornamental birds is one of those currently permitted, for the purpose of "general animal management" (Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2010, SSI 2010/387, Reg. 3 and Sch 3). While the procedure must be carried out "in such a way as to minimise the pain and suffering it causes to the animal" and "in accordance with good practice", the regulations do not specify how this is to be achieved (notwithstanding a further provision that conditions may be specified as to the manner in which an exempted procedure is to be carried out).

By way of contrast to this somewhat casual approach, the Secretary of State's Standards of Modern Zoo Practice (2012) describe the pinioning of waterfowl to be a "specialist technique" requiring to be "kept under continual review" and "should not be undertaken lightly". Indeed, zoos are required to have "an ethical policy and code of practice regarding pinioning and be prepared to defend it" (paras 3.28 and appendix 8, para 6.7).

In the light of the above, and in order to safeguard the welfare of ornamental birds in Scotland, the Commission urges Scottish Ministers to consider removing pinioning from the list of exempted mutilations in Schedule 3 of the Prohibited Procedures on Protected Animals (Exemptions) (Scotland) Regulations 2010.

Yours sincerely



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Scottish Animal Welfare Commission

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