

RAPTOR REPORT



Crating for Success.

Kit Lacy and Zach Zeneberg, CPBT-KA, Cascades Raptor Center, Eugene OR

Crate training at the Cascades Raptor Center was traditionally a behavior we focused on with ambassador raptors only after they had mastered the other “behavioral basics,” like targeting to a location, voluntary scale behavior, hopping to the glove, and moving around while on the glove. However, we recently had the opportunity to make the crate part of daily life for a Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*) from the very first day he came into our care. This pre-fledged Great Horned Owl arrived at our facility in a wire dog kennel, relinquished by the misguided (but well-intentioned) individuals who had found him as a nestling and raised him in their home.

Immediately, we noted this young owl exhibited aversive responses to the finders’ hands. While they were unaware of the owl’s reaction, our training staff recognized the information the owl was trying to convey. We decided we needed to somehow transfer this owl out of the wire dog kennel and into a safer transport crate for the move into an assessment aviary. We also didn’t want to grab him up, given his aversion to hands. As a solution, we quickly put together a plastic Vari-kennel crate (26” L x 34”H x 22” W) and lined the bottom with the same AstroTurf we use on most of our perches. The turf becomes a signal to the raptors of appropriate and safe perches and also helps maintain foot health, so we introduce new birds to it as soon as possible. After adjusting the two door openings, we tossed some mice into the newly constructed crate and waited until the owl self-loaded into our new safe transport.

We carried the crate into our 16’L x 8’W x 10’H new resident outdoor assessment and quarantine aviary, which is away from the bustle of the public and has two entry doors off the vestibule allowing us to maintain space away from a new bird as we enter (we can enter from the door away from where the bird is perching). We left the door off the crate for maximum clearance (instead using our bodies to block the opening as we carried it) and gave the owl



Baby Neville checking out his crate. Photo credit: Kit Lacy

the opportunity to exit the crate into the aviary when he was ready. Once he exited the crate, we left it in the corner where it was initially placed, directly on the ground. To complete the set up, we placed a fleece mat with which the owl was familiar inside the crate on the AstroTurf mat, and positioned another AstroTurf mat outside the crate like a “welcome mat.” As a stationary, passive part of the environment, we hoped that the crate would become a normal, comfortable part of this owl’s life.

Within days, we noticed the crate was part of the owl’s regular activity. Enrichment items left in his aviary were found cached in the back of the crate, and his fleece mat had been dragged out, left tucked into the corner of the aviary. At this point it was clear to us he was utilizing the space on his own time, and obviously comfortable going in and out of the crate. We decided it was time to try to have him engage in this behavior in the context of training sessions.

During training sessions, we started by using a small piece of food reinforcer (a mouse bit) as a lure, placed on the mat just outside of the crate to elicit the owl’s movement towards the entrance of the crate. He would jump to the piece of reinforcement and we would follow up with additional bits directly to his beak from the right hand. With bits concealed in the right hand, we’d point into the crate and drop them as soon as he noticed the gesture, at which point he would walk in for the second lure piece. Periodic reinforcement with food to his beak while he remained stationed in the crate meant the entire behavior grew strong enough that we could fade the lures quickly.

At this point there was no door on the crate, to make sure he had a bit more room to maneuver as he built the skill and dexterity required to move in and out on his gawky, young owl feet. We also always made sure he had a clear exit from the crate at all times, so he could choose to leave. To prevent him practicing leaving the crate without a cue, however, we made sure to watch for precursor behaviors indicating he might want to exit, and then cue and reinforce a target to the mat back out-



Above: Neville using the crate as a nap space. Photo credit: Laura Farah

Below: First crate set-up for Neville. Photo credit: Kit Lacy



side of the crate’s entrance.

Once he was targeting to the entrance mat, as well as into and out of the crate without a lure piece, we decided to modify the crate so that it was travel-ready. We added a solid door (coroplast placed over the wire Vari-kennel standard), installed a perch, and built a small table to keep the crate a foot or so off the ground. Since the crate

was permanently in his space, we used a bungee cord to secure the door and prevent it from swinging closed. Because the crate was off the ground for ease of loading off of the glove during sessions, we placed a log on its side for him to use as a step to enter and exit the crate with ease when he was self-loading and unloading. Once we placed the new crate in his space, we did not ask him into the crate that



in the environment. Having his crate so near at hand, directly in his aviary, allows us to react to an emergency situation quickly and efficiently. Should we need to evacuate in the event of a wildfire, we can quickly cue him into his crate and to move off-site without needing to bring the bird to the crate, or the crate to the bird first.

The crate, for this owl, has become a safe and comfortable haven. We can observe this, directly, in special moments throughout the day. We find him sitting in his crate during rain storms even though he has safe, sheltered high perches to use. His enrichment objects are often hidden away inside, though we never catch him in the act. And, sometimes, at the end of a training session he'll just stay sitting inside the crate, full of mice, as he watches us go on our way: content to sit on his perch within.

Opposite left: Neville in his crate with enrichment.

Opposite right: Neville exiting his crate.

Right: Neville's travel crate set up on table in his aviary.

All photos credit: Kit Lacy

day. We let him explore the new crate set-up by placing some of his enrichment items in the crate. The next day, the enrichment items were found outside of the crate, demonstrating he had been in and out of the crate on his own. Even though the crate had been altered, he generalized the previously learned behaviors to the new setup with ease.

To get ready to travel, we began approximating the crate door closing by just moving the door slightly and reinforcing his calm behavior. Having the crate in his aviary increased our ability to allow him to leave the crate without any negative consequences, if he felt overwhelmed. One time, the sound of the bungee tapping the side of the crate startled him. He left the crate quickly but there were no safety issues - he just quickly exited and went to a high and familiar perch. Because we were not holding onto jesses or in a space that was not familiar to him, we did not have to physically prevent him from leaving due to our mistake. Instead, trainers were able to cue him back to the crate and start the session again. He had total control of the situation.

We adjusted each door closing approximation slightly by closing the door a bit more each time before opening it and

reinforcing him again. Since this owl was sound sensitive, we also gradually exposed him to the sound of the door latch mechanism springs. As we were handing him bits with one hand, we would move the door securing mechanism with other hand to counter-condition the sound of the springs. We were soon able to close the door and reinforce longer and longer durations with the door closed by handing bits to his beak through a slot in the side of the crate.

During this training process, we accidentally discovered that the only cue he needed to load into the crate was the movement of the trainer towards the crate, no pointing required! He was now so comfortable with the process, as soon as we moved towards the crate, he would fly over to the log at the entrance and hop in, self-loading and waiting for reinforcement. This highlighted for our trainers that sometimes the animal picks up on unintentional behaviors we offer, learning a completely different cue than we might intend.

For anyone with the appropriate space, equipment, and time, there are many benefits to structuring crate training around the crate as a passive, ever-present, familiar object

