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Special Equipment for Handling Snakes

Our topics for this week are:

- **Handling snakes without special equipment**
- **Using hooks, shields, boxes, poles, tongs, and tubes to handle snakes**

Snakes are typically supported with their movement directed, not held in a manner to inhibit their movement. Holding them tightly stimulates the snake to attempt escape from a predator. This can also seriously damage their muscles and cause death days later. They should be given the illusion that they are free to escape when they want. As they are loosely held, a "rolling hands" technique of holding them gives them the illusion that they are not trapped. They are allowed to move from one hand to the next then the hand they left becomes the next hand they move to. Immobilizing types of restraint should typically not be used. When holding a snake, it should never be held near the handler's face.

The most likely time for a handler to be bitten is when reaching into the snake's enclosure. The handler may startle them or because of the movement of his hand being perceived as food or containing food, can stimulate a bite attempt. Food odor on the hands will worsen the risk of being bitten. When reaching into an enclosure for an unfamiliar snake, the handler should block the snake's head with one hand held flat with fingers together. The purpose is to create a barrier over the snake's head while reaching for the body with the other hand. A flat hand is more difficult to bite.

Handling should not be attempted if food smell is on the handler's hands or if the snake has recently eaten. Handling a snake soon after it has eaten, may cause the snake to regurgitate. This is common in ball pythons.

If a snake is possibly dangerous, a snake hook first should be used to lift the snake and then grasp their body. For those that are known to be dangerous, the head should be immobilized before picking the snake up. The basic hold for snake head restraint is to grasp the base of the skull between the thumb and middle finger with the index finger on top of the head. A snake pinning hook to pin the neck down on a soft surface may be needed to limit movement until the snake's head can be grasped for manual control. The snake's body should be restrained and supported after capturing the head to prevent thrashing and breaking its back. The snake's head should be held firmly without squeezed. Approximately one handler is needed per 5 ft to control boids.

Special Equipment

Lifting Hook

Snake hooks can be used to move snakes a short distance such as into a transport bag. The hook is worked under the snake between the first one-third to one-half of the snake's length to pick it up. The snake will remain still, trying to keep its balance. Snake hook poles should always be tilted down, away from the handler. Otherwise, the snake may slide toward the handler. Hooks can also help in guiding the movement of snakes on the ground or a floor.

Pinning Hook

A pinning hook is a Y-shaped stick with tubing for padding can be used to introduce a handler's presence and if necessary, pin a snake's head. Pinning sticks should be used when the snake is on a padded surface to reduce risk of injury to the snake. A strap of elastic extends from one of the ends of the Y to the other. The head can be immobilized by pressing the elastic band just behind the head, pushing the head down and trapping it until the head can be grasped by a free hand. Two pinning sticks may be necessary for difficult snakes. The base of the head is then grasped between the thumb and middle finger with the index finger on the top of the head and the stick removed.

Shields and Squeeze Box

Plexiglass or wire mesh shields with handles can be used to pin snakes until the head can be restrained. Properly fitted ventilated plexiglass or wire mesh lids on a box can be used to contain movement of the snake while the shield descends into the box to squeeze them for administration of injectable medication or chemical restraint. The bottom of the squeeze box should be padded.

Capture Poles

A capture pole can be made with a 3 foot long wooden pole, eye screw, and a long cord. One end of the cord is tied to, or otherwise fixed to, the end of the pole. The other end of the cord is run through an eye screw placed an inch from the end of the pole where the end of the cord is fixated. A capture loop is then recreated between the fixed end and the eye screw. The loop is dropped around the snake's neck and the loop closed on the neck by pulling on the cord. The risk of injuring the snake is greater than with a hook, but if gentle pressure is applied with the loop and restraint is short, a capture pole can be safe and effective.

Capture Tongs

Capture tongs are long handled metal grasping instruments. It is difficult to gauge the pressure being exerted with tongs so the risk of injury to a snake can be significant. Tongs can make a snake thrash and bite itself. Capture tongs should not be the sole means of restraint of a snake, but tongs can be useful to assist when handling a snake with a lifting hook.

Tongs should be used in presenting food to large snakes and in moving environmental enrichment objects in a snake enclosure.

Transparent, Flexible Tubes

Bad-tempered snakes, such as small reticulated pythons, with a history of inappropriate biting should be handled in the same manner as poisonous snakes. Aggressive snakes can be moved to a large plastic bucket with its transport bag or using a snake hook. As the snake investigates a possible escape route upward and out of the bucket, a flexible, preferably darkened, tube can be placed over the snake's head and down part of the front of its body. A snake hook can help guide the head, if needed. Use of a cone to guide the snake into the tube is another method.

The tube should be just large enough to accommodate the thickest part of the snake's body so that it cannot turn around in the tube and long enough to keep the handler's hand on the tube, out of danger. Tubes work best for pit vipers due to their broad triangular head. When the snake has entered 1/3 of the tube's distance, the snake and tube are grasped to entrap the snake. If the first tube seems too large in diameter, a smaller tube can be slid down the open end to the snake for it to enter. The snake and small tube can be grasped and then the larger tube removed. Releasing the snake back into the bucket, transport bag, or enclosure is done by allowing it to move forward through the tube and out the other end.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular animal handling subjects, contact us at CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com

Now let's recap the key points to remember from today's episode:

1. **Friendly snakes should be handled slowly without equipment using loose hand restraint that permits the snake to move.**
2. **A lifting pole is the most useful and safe means of handling most snakes that require special equipment.**
3. **Capture tongs should not be used as a sole means of handling a snake due to the risk of injury to the snake.**

More information on animal handling can be found in my books, ***Animal Handling and Physical Restraint***, ***Concise Textbook of Small Animal Handling, and Concise Textbook of Large Animal Handling*** all published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is provided at: www.betteranimalhandling.com . This website has more than 200 past podcasts with notes on handling of dogs, cats, other small mammals, birds, reptiles, horses, cattle, small ruminants, swine, and poultry.

Don't forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.

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