

PINIONING WATERFOWL DOWNIES

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NEIL FORBES outlines the reasons why practitioners may be asked to pinion waterfowl and describes the procedure for ensuring least risk to the welfare of the young bird

BEFORE the Animal Welfare Act 2006, one of the listed exemptions was the pinioning of waterfowl downies (less than 10 days of age) by suitably trained and equipped lay persons.

However, when statute was set, no exemption was listed. This issue was brought to public notice in 2013 and Defra has made its position quite clear. Pinioning of waterfowl chicks (less than 10 days of age) remains permissible, but as a “surgical procedure” it must be carried out by a veterinary surgeon. Pinioning of birds more than 10 days of age may not be carried out as a routine management procedure – anaesthesia is mandatory and it may only be done in exceptional circumstances, by a veterinary surgeon, where that clinician is able to convince him or herself the procedure is in the individual bird’s best interest.

Inevitably, there will be debates (quite rightly) as to whether pinioning is ethically acceptable as, in particular, it prevents flight, which is a contradiction with the need to allow an animal “freedom to express most normal patterns of behaviour, space, facilities, occupation”; however, there is also a legal requirement to prevent the release of non-indigenous species into the wildlife population.

Escaped non-indigenous birds may hybridise with native species, or competition may arise between the invasive non-indigenous species with a resident native population for nest sites, food supplies and so on. Further to this, it is argued some conservationally sensitive species, which are bred and managed in captivity, cannot be kept in netted enclosures, while in contrast they do well as pinioned birds in open enclosures.

However, all these arguments aside, the reality is waterfowl breeders are no longer permitted to pinion their own young birds and may seek assistance from local veterinary surgeons, to carry out a surgical procedure, with which they are very familiar, but that very few vets have ever had the need to carry out.

These instructions are published not to condone the procedure, but in an effort to ensure that where colleagues are obliged to do this procedure, a good job is done with minimal short or long-term negative welfare effects on the patient.

Pinioning procedure

It is optimal to pinion young waterfowl when they are three to four days old, when their wing extremities are cartilage covered in skin and down.

Pinioning is the act of removing the tip of one wing, just distal to the alula or “bastard wing”. It is vital the alula remains intact and not damaged and that the common metacarpus is taken as short as possible under the alula. If a longer length of common metacarpus remains after pinioning, either the bird may not be rendered flightless, or when flapping the wing, the end is no longer protected by the alula, and trauma and damage repeatedly occurs to the post-pinioning stump.

In carrying out the procedure when the bird is still a downie (two to five days, but typically three to four days old), the wing tip is very small and trauma and blood loss are minimised.

If the vet is right-handed, the duckling is held in the left hand, with the right wing abducted and held between the thumb and index finger, applying pressure to the wing at the level of the carpal joint, just proximal to the alula.

A sharp pair of sterile scissors is used to cut through the common metacarpus, in line with the dotted line as shown ([Figure 1](#)). Pressure is maintained for a few seconds. Once pressure is removed, any bleeding is controlled by application of a silver nitrate pencil ([Figure 2](#)).

The section of wing removed (4mm to 5mm at longest) is that to which the primary feathers would in future be attached. In some species, such as shelducks and whistling ducks, in which the secondary feathers are particularly long, the individual may not be rendered totally flightless (owners of such species should be warned of this fact).

It is important there is no sign of blood on the wing tip when the downie is placed back with clutch mates, otherwise they may peck at it.

During the myiasis risk season (May 1 to October 1), it may be prudent to apply a small volume of topical fly repellent.

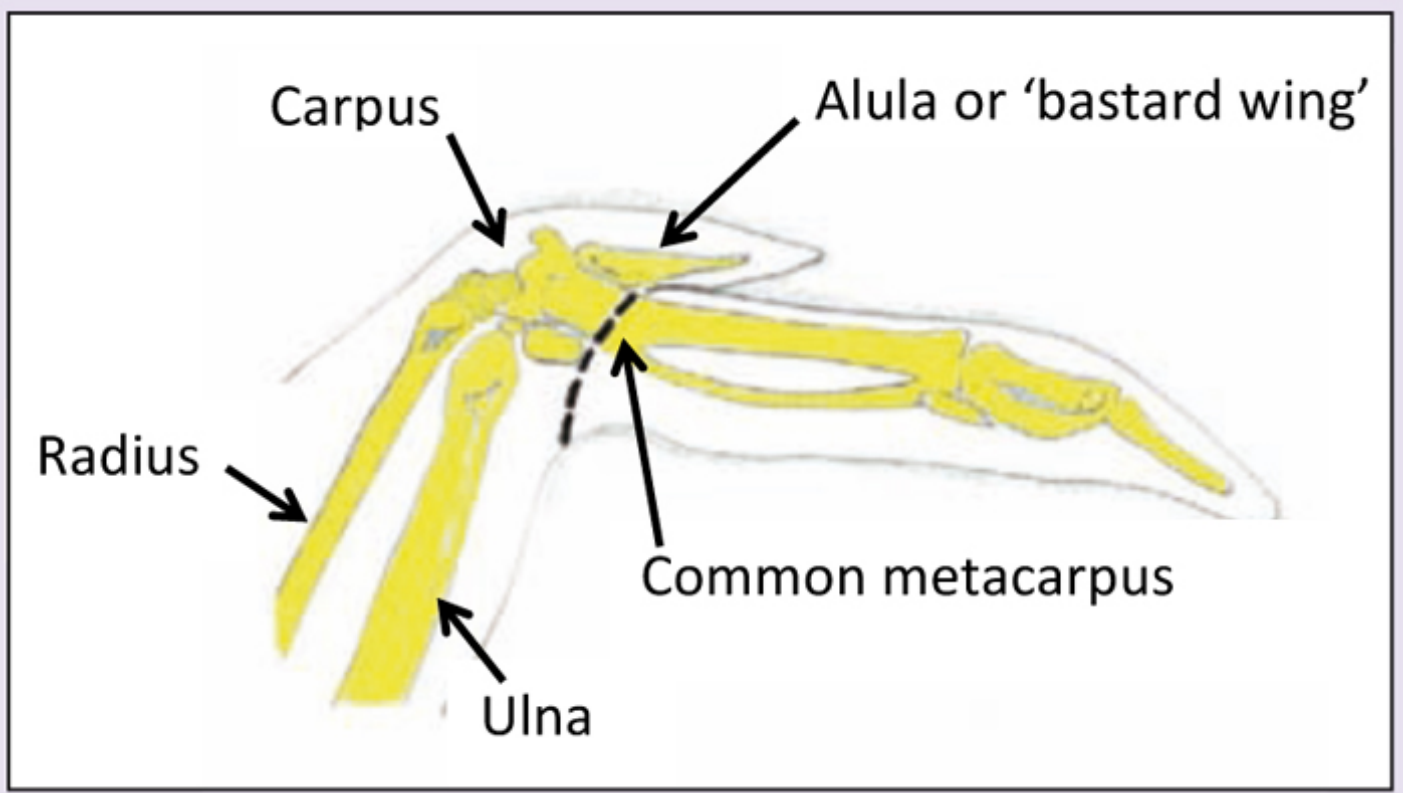


Figure 1. Positioning of the cut.



Figure 2. Duckling with wound powder on stump.

Image: RON TOFT.