

1977

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Recommended Citation

Thomas, Betsy Trent (1977) "Hooding and Other Techniques for Holding and Handling Nestling Storks," *North American Bird Bander*. Vol. 2 : Iss. 2 , Article 1.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.usf.edu/nabb/vol2/iss2/1>

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Fig. 1. Maguari Stork nestlings

Hooding and other techniques for holding and handling nestling storks

Betsy Trent Thomas

Handling nestlings of large species can be a problem — particularly when there are several young per nest and they are equipped with long necks and sharp bills. In such situations there is a potential danger to both bander and bandee.

In the course of a projected 10-year field study of the life history of the Maguari Stork (*Ciconia* [= *Euxenura*] *maguari*) in Venezuela, I have had to originate solutions to several such problems. Possibly others who handle large birds — particularly herons, other waders and raptors — might wish to adapt some of these techniques to their research. Workers at avian rehabilitation centers could also find a hood, as described below, useful.

I band the Maguari nestlings at the age of 3½ to 5 weeks. By then they average around 70 cm tall, with a wing span of 1½ m and some weigh more than 4 k (about 9 lbs.). In addition, they have sharp-edged bills as much as 15 cm long, which makes controlling a single bird difficult, let alone the three or four found in some nests (Figure 1).

As soon as I climb to the nest, I throw a meter-square piece of heavy black cotton corduroy over the nestlings before they can back off the nest in fright. Then I gently, but firmly, push down on the head of each nestling so that it sits down on its tarsi in the familiar position forced on it by a brooding adult. The thick cloth usually keeps the birds docile but if one stands up it is an easy matter to push it down again. The cloth has another advantage: it keeps the young birds cool — or would maintain warmth in cold areas — since work at the nest denies the attending adult stork access for its important shading role.

Next, I remove the nestlings one at a time for banding and measuring, returning each bird before taking another. Before removing a nestling from under the cloth, I slip a special hood over the bird's bill and head. Inspired by a falconer's hood, I designed one for nestling Maguari Storks. The hood is made of black felt and strong nylon netting such as that used for tent windows. Since my banding, measuring, examining and weighing of each

bird can take up to 10 minutes, I had to be sure that the nestling could breathe easily, which is the purpose of the net cone that allows the bird adequate air. The tip of the net cone is bound in felt making a firm but soft edge that keeps the bill closed. The hood is slipped over the bill first, then adjusted on the head, after which the felt ties are crossed loosely under the bird's chin and tied with a single overhand knot behind its neck, making sure that the knot is very loose (Figure 2). Dimensions of the stork hood I use and directions for making it are given (Figure 4).

Once the bird is hooded, it becomes quite calm and it can be handled with ease. Besides pacifying the bird, the hood helps to prevent injuries to both bird and bander. This in turn relaxes the bander who can then concentrate more fully on his work or on other problems sometimes encountered, such as maintaining his balance in a high shaky tree or, as in my case, occasional aggressive attacks from behind by the parent birds.

I also made myself a carpenter's apron with pockets that fit the tools I use. A bag of nylon netting, 45 x 60 cm, with buttonhole stitch reinforced eyelets at the open corners is useful when weighing the birds on either a 2500 g pesola scale or, for heavier birds, on a 10 k grocer's scale (Figure 3). The small size of the bag keeps the bird's wings and legs folded safely. I also use it to carry the birds back up to the nest should they fall out or if I have to take them down to the ground for examination.

Fig. 2. Hooded stork



Fig. 3. Weighing banded nestling with 10-kilogram scales.

As I finish with each nestling, I place it — facing away from me — under the corduroy cloth with the others and slip the hood off. When I am finished with all nestlings, I climb down from the nest as far as possible but still within reach of one corner of the cloth, which I then pull down slowly. By the time the nestlings stand up, I am well away from the nest and often out of the tree.

I made several sizes of hoods, each color-coded by a bit of material sewed on the end of one of the ties for quick selection. However, if you make more than one hood, a word of caution is in order. It is easier than you might think, in the excitement of a new observation or special problem at the nest, to forget that one of the birds is still hooded when you leave. Therefore double check the number of hoods before leaving the area, for a mortality at this point is counter productive for all concerned.

I thank Dr. Charles T. Collins for suggesting that I make these techniques available to a wider audience and Dr. Peter Ames who recommended use of the cloth nest cover at the beginning of my study, four years ago, and Sr. Tomás Blohm on whose ranch the field work is being done.

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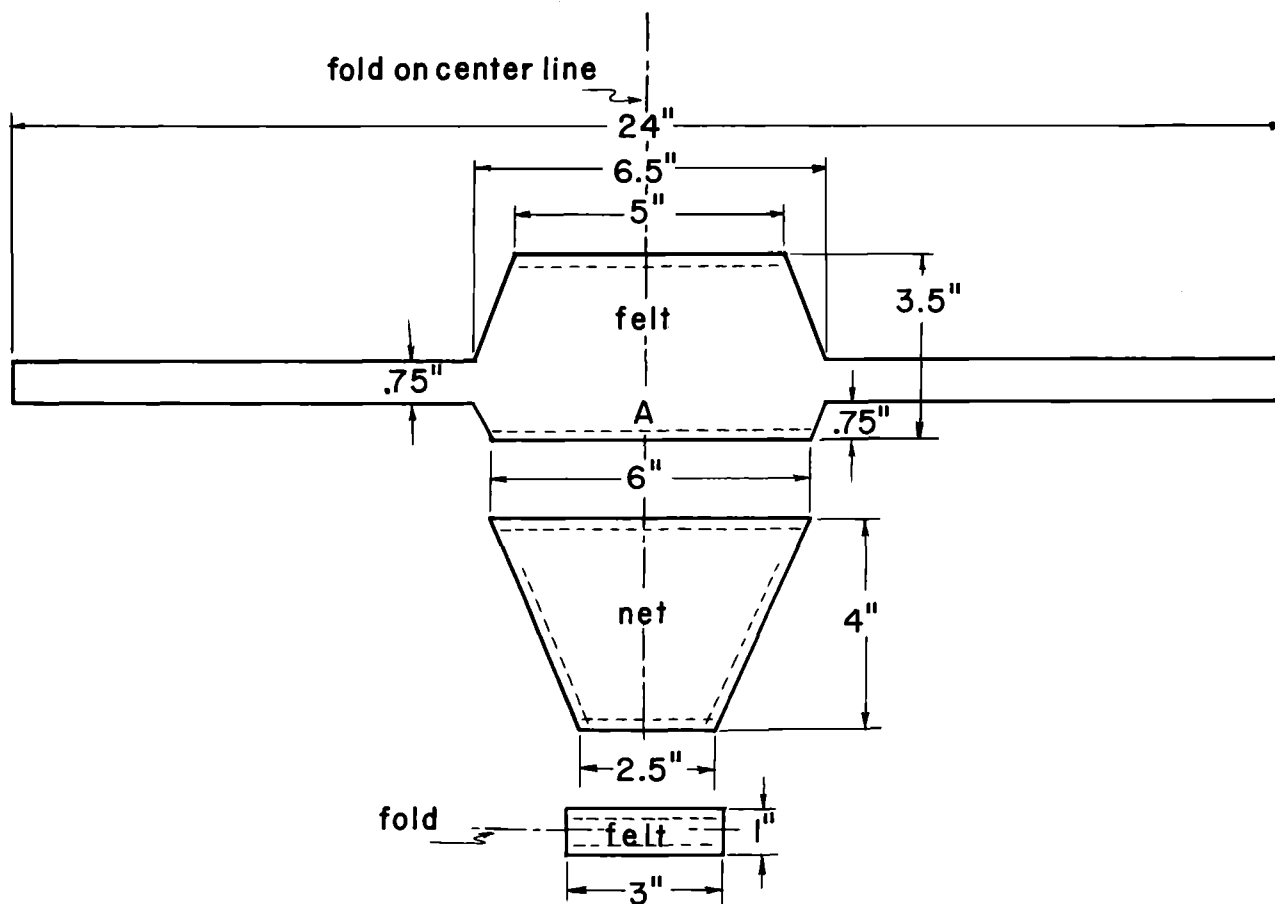


Fig. 4. Stork hood

- (1) Cut out a paper pattern based on the above diagrammed dimensions.
- (2) Modify, or cut another pattern, according to the size and shape of the head of the species on which it will be used, trying it out if necessary on a museum specimen.
- (3) Cut out the two pieces of felt and the one piece of net using the remodeled pattern.
- (4) Sew (a sewing machine is best) the net to side "A" of the hood with a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch seam; then bind the

front edge of the netting with the smaller piece of felt.

- (5) Finally, seam the edge of the net cone with double stitching starting at the felt tip and continuing to a point half way to the back of the hood. Finish by seaming the back of the hood together.

Note: Use the hood with all the seams on the outside so that the interior is smooth and will not injure the bird.