

THE "DOG HOUSE" METHOD OF RESTRAINT FOR SMALL PINNIPEDS¹

S. Spotte, Sea Research Foundation, Inc., Mystic Marinelif e Aquarium, Mystic, CT 06355, U.S.A.

Several cage designs for restraint of large pinnipeds are available (GENTRY and JOHNSON 1978, RIDGWAY and SIMPSON 1969). Most small pinnipeds (50 kg or less) are still restrained manually by a handler wearing heavy gloves. This practice is dangerous to both man and animal. It is not uncommon for handlers to be bitten or for animals to suffer broken teeth and eye and neck injuries as they struggle.

The device described here minimizes most risks involved in restraining small pinnipeds, either captive or feral. It is useful for flipper tagging, bleach- or dye-marking, administering intramuscular injections, and drawing blood from the hindflippers. The first handlers to use the device named it the "dog house," for obvious reasons. The unit, pictured in Figure 1, is a wood box (1.3 cm plywood) with an opening at one end. The top of the opening is rounded to conform with the shape of the animal. The box is 91 cm long, 40.6 cm wide, 40.6 cm high, and weighs 11.5 kg. It can be built to collapse for transport, making it a convenient field tool.

A handler drops the box over a pinniped. The raised edges along the two sides prevent foreflippers from being pinched against the ground and also allow the foreflippers of otariids to be held firmly for tagging. Once an animal is inside, the handler sits on top of the box, grabs the hindflippers when they appear in the opening, and pulls the seal or sea lion backwards to its rump. The opening must be large enough to expose the hindquarters, but too small to allow the front part of the body to be pulled through.

Alternatively, an animal is captured by grabbing its hindflippers and held while someone else positions the box and then sits on it. This method eliminates the risk of reaching for an animal through the opening and perhaps grabbing the wrong end.

The opening can be cut to the desired size, depending on the age and species of pinniped being restrained. The opening of the box used at Mystic Marinelif e Aquarium is 19 cm high at the highest point and 28 cm in width. With smaller pinnipeds, another plywood board with an opening that is 16.5 cm high and 24 cm wide is inserted behind the fixed opening and held in place with a bolt and wingnut (Fig. 1). All openings are sanded around the edges to prevent chafing of the animals' skins.

The "dog house" design has been used for more than 10 yr at Aquarium of Niagara Falls and for 5 yr at Mystic Marinelif e Aquarium. The device has been used routinely to restrain juvenile Atlantic harbor seals (*Phoca vitulina*), juvenile harp seals (*Phoca groenlandicus*), juvenile California sea lions (*Zalophus californianus*) and adult female northern fur seals (*Callorhinus ursinus*).

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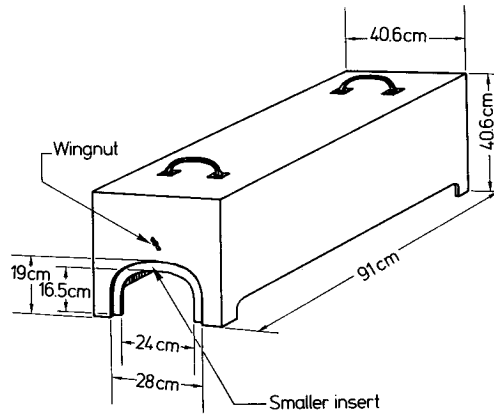


Fig. 1 Device called the "dog house" for restraint of small pinnipeds.

References

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