

The Use of Falconry Hoods in Handling Australian Kestrels

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The Australian Kestrel *Falco cenchroides* has a reputation of being restless and a notorious habit of taking every opportunity to bite its captor whilst being handled for banding. Although a dark bag may be used to cover the bird's head and body during actual banding, generally the bird must be removed from the bag to permit measurements to be taken and details of plumage recorded. However, it is somewhat difficult for a lone bander to accomplish these tasks whilst the bird's head and talons are held to prevent the bander from being mauled.

In an endeavour to calm captive birds, simplify handling and protect the bander from being bitten, a hood similar to those traditionally used in falconry was designed to fit Australian Kestrels. The hood has subsequently been used on about thirty individuals with considerable success. All of the hooded kestrels remained calm throughout handling and most importantly did not attempt to use their beaks to savage the bander.

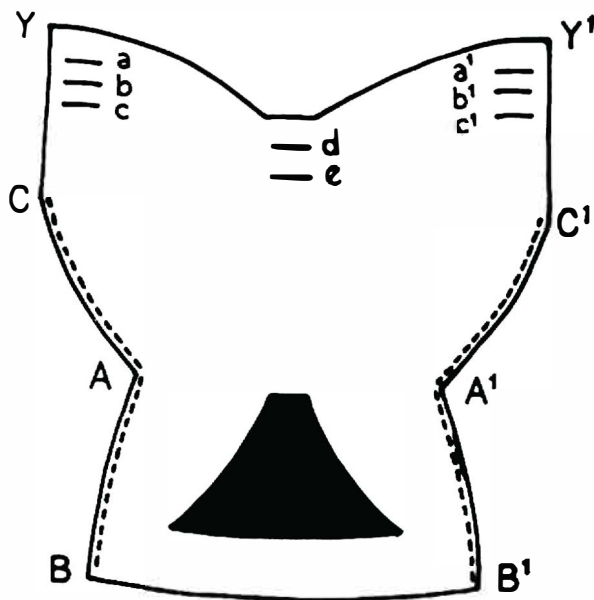
Methods

Construction of hood

The hood is made of thin leather such as goat skin — I used a black book binding leather of 0.7 mm thickness — cut to the shape of the pattern in Figure 1. It is important that thin, light leather be used as the weight of the hood must be kept to a minimum to ensure that the bird is not distressed by the weight and hang its head. A kestrel hood should weigh no more than about 3 grams — my hood weighs 2.3 grams and no discomfort was noted in hooded birds. The shaded area in the pattern is completely removed and forms the hole for the beak. Slits are cut as shown at points a, b, c, d, e, a' b' and c'.

Edges AB and A' B' are sewn to edges AC and A' C' respectively. The simplest method of stitching is to form an external seam. Note that the smooth (hair) side of the leather is to the inside. Alternatively, a stitch may be used which gives a flush joint.

The lower back parts of the hood are connected by two leather braces. These comprise strips of leather 5 mm wide and 180 mm long. A "button", made by rolling about 15 mm of the leather strip and then passing the brace through a hole punched in the roll, should be made in one end of each brace and the other end tapered for ease of fitting to the hood. A slit 30 mm long is cut commencing 20 mm from



● Figure 1. Hood pattern for Australian Kestrel (Actual size).

the button. The braces are then attached to either side of the hood as illustrated in Figure 2 and the tapered ends then knotted.

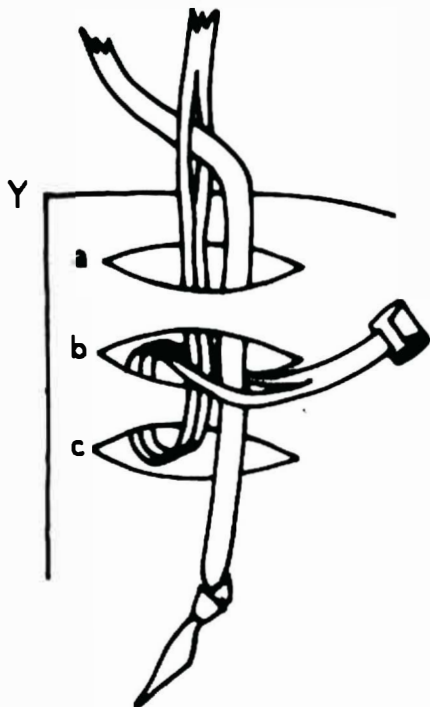
By pulling the tapered ends of the braces, the rear of the hood is drawn closed and by pulling the buttons the hood is opened.

The last step in construction is to attach a plume on the hood, to be used as a holding point when placing the hood on and removing it from the bird. A strip of leather 5 mm wide and 70 mm long is threaded equally from the inside of the hood through slits d and e. A small slit is then cut toward the base of each protruding piece and the opposite lengths are then alternately passed through the slits to form an erect plume.

Finally, wet the hood and manipulate the front and sides of the beak opening so that they bulge forward. The sides behind the eye should be bulged outwards. When dry, the outside of the hood may be treated with clear nail polish to maintain stiffness but this is not essential.

Fitting the Hood

When alone, I have found it easiest to hood kestrels whilst they are still snared on the bal-



● Figure 2. Details of brace attachment (not to scale).

chatri trap. The upper body and head are held as the hood, held by the plume, is brought up under the bird's chin until the strap reaches the lower mandible. The hood is then tilted over the head and the braces pulled tight. Most birds will try to bite the hood and several attempts may be necessary before the hood is fitted.

Although female kestrels tend to be slightly larger than males, a single hood made to the pattern illustrated was found suitable for use on both sexes and no problems were experienced with light penetration if the braces were drawn tight.

However, it is most important that the hood is a good fit before it is relied upon to blind and calm each individual bird. If light gets through, the bird may struggle and escape with the hood still attached. This of course, would be embarrassing to the bander but more importantly it would also probably be fatal to the kestrel as it may not be capable of removing a properly fitted hood.

As mentioned above, the hood made to the pattern illustrated in Figure 1 has fitted all kestrels on which I have tried it, but it is possible the occasional bird may be too large or too small and this hood should not be used on these individuals. The basic hood pattern illustrated may be scaled either up or down to fit different sized kestrels and other hawks.

On removal of the hood, the bird should be held for a few seconds to allow its eyes to adjust to the light before being released.

Acknowledgements

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References

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