

A Vote for the Rubber-topped Gathering Cage
By Robert P. Yunick

In the July-August, 1963 EBBA News, Frank Frazier described the use of rubber tubing for gathering cage doors, and about a year later in the May-June, 1964 issue, Dorothy Bordner illustrated and described a rubber-topped gathering cage (RTC). I should like to cast my vote for the adoption of this cage by more banders.

Dorothy described the construction details and these can be modified as she said to what one has handy at the time. My own are made of oak framing and one-eighth inch hardboard with three coats of exterior-grade varnish to waterproof the cage. By all means use a vinyl, nylon or other plastic-type screening. These are sometimes difficult to locate, because everyone seems to carry only aluminum these days. I finally located olive-drab vinyl in an army surplus store for 39¢/sq. yd. Metal screens cannot be used for hooked beak species (flycatchers, vireos, etc.), because the birds break their bill tips. Besides a broken bill being bad for the bird, the shortened bill of an Empidonax flycatcher may change its identity.

It is the advantages of this type of cage that I'd like to stress.

1. It is very well ventilated.
2. It allows the safe transport or holding of very large numbers of sparrows, warblers, other small passerines and the smaller shore birds.
3. It is extremely sanitary and convenient to clean.
4. It is easily handled.

1. Most compartmented cages of plywood, cardboard, milk cartons, etc., offer limited air to their captives, and in warm weather some birds come out of the cage gasping, and damp or clammy feeling. The RTC provides excellent ventilation and keeps birds fresh.

2. Because of the adequate ventilation and the perching surface on the screening as well as the floor, large numbers of small birds are easily handled. Dorothy claims 27 juncos in one cell with no harm. I concur. I have had well over 50 bank swallows in a four-cell unit measuring 6X13X21", and every bird was vigorous and clean. Also I have had up to 21 song sparrows in one cell of a four-cell unit measuring 8X13X30.

3. Sanitation is one of the top features. By lining the bottom with 10-12 sheets of newspaper, droppings are rapidly absorbed, and at the end of each day one simply opens the cage and removes the top sheet or two and has a clean one ready for the next day. I have yet to see a simpler and more effective technique. Two or three times a year, I hose down the cages and scrub with a stiff-bristled floor brush and detergent, and the varnished finish, screening and rubber come clean.

My experience with the compartmented cages has been rather sad as far as sanitation is concerned. The birds, and the bander's hands usually come out dirty. How many times has a bird's tail been frayed,

or some plumage characteristic obliterated by the messy condition of these compartmented cages?

4. Generally, depending on size and construction materials, the RTC is moderate in weight and not objectionable to carry. My 6x13x21-inch size weighs six pounds; and the 8x13x30-inch size, nine pounds. Pine rather than oak would make these lighter. One can also alter the size for lighter weight or to suit one's particular needs. The larger one could easily hold 100 small passerines and probably more if need be. In the holding of over 2000 birds in the RTC in the past year, I have had five escapees that I know of - a grackle, red-wing and three starlings, but each of these escaped from a cage where the rubber top was stretched a little too much and caused the slits to open slightly.

I know of no other durable carrying cage that has such a desirable set of qualities for handling small passerines and shore birds in large quantity. Most coastal operation recovery banders are familiar with the blitz flights that require the holding of large numbers of birds while nets are furled or banding accomplished. The RTC works well in such cases. As Dorothy mentioned, the RTC is not suited for grosbeaks, or for that matter other belligerent species. One soon learns by experience and a little thought on the matter what species are compatible and incompatible. My experiences with the RTC on purple finches has been most amusing. These birds represent a borderline case in cage compatibility. With five or six finches in a cell, the reaching into the cage is analogous to fishing. As one's hand enters the rubber slit, most of the finches rear back their heads, open their bills and prepare to attack the intruder. As one's hand moves back and forth searching for a bird, the finches' heads weave back and forth following the movement. Finally one strikes. At these moments one can sympathize with a worm on a fish hook.

Congratulations to Dorothy for the design of the RTC.

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