

Net Worth

Tips and tricks for one of the most important animal-handling tools

BY PETER FREEMAN

I started using nets on my first day as an animal control officer, more than 25 years ago. Faced with the task of catching a feral cat who had escaped into the backyard of a hoarder's residence, I used a net with a small mesh size to safely and humanely contain and then transport the cat to the shelter. The mesh size of the net was important to the task—the holes were not large enough to fit a pencil through, and I noticed that the feral cat appeared calmer once inside the net, seeming to relax a bit once his body was enclosed by the small, dark mesh. It was my first glimpse at how the right piece of equipment can make an animal control task easier and less stressful for animals and their handlers.

Of all the tools used in animal capture and handling, the net stands out as an essential piece of equipment. Nets of all shapes and sizes are vital to have in the field. Nets can be used for so many species, in such a wide variety of situations, that they're a standout universal tool. The unique features of netting equipment can allow a handler safer and quicker captures, along with offering some comfort for the animal within the netting.

There is a wide choice of net styles for various needs and situations. Some net frames fold up for easier storage and transport. Others have flexible hoops that bend on the ground and up walls. There are nets with extra-wide hoop frames or long extension handles for hard-to-reach areas, and scissoring nets that can fit into tight spaces such as shelter cages.

How Nets Can Help

Nets help animals—and animal handlers—in a variety of ways.

- Small-mesh netting provides a more enclosed environment that helps animals feel calmer and safer. The net bag can even be tightened to help the animal feel secure; positioning or twisting the net bag helps reduce the excess space in the bag. (A towel can also be loosely placed over the animal for further calming effect. Just make sure to allow adequate ventilation for the animal to breathe.)
- When working with avians, small-mesh netting can help prevent feathers from being damaged. The smaller holes keep birds and other animals from becoming entangled within the mesh. This is important when it comes time to remove an animal from the net bag safely, or in cases where you need to allow a potentially dangerous animal to exit the open net bag on his own. Either way, the animal needs to be free of entanglement to avoid injury.
- Netting allows ventilation and helps prevent heat from building up when you're holding or transporting an animal within netting. It also does not allow fluids (such as urine) to collect in one place.
- Netting can also allow you to partially see the enclosed animal in cases where you need to assess her health or look for identifying marks or tags.
- In most cases, animals can be left in the net during vehicle transport. This can be a less stressful way for the animal to travel, reducing the chance for an animal to escape during a field transfer. Some nets even have a closure mechanism to contain the animal within the net bag for secure transport. It's a good idea to carry tote boxes with blankets in your vehicle; these can provide a soft, dark place for the netted animal to remain during transport.



A net with a small mesh provides a darker, more private-feeling space that can make a trapped animal feel more comfortable and calmer.



Tightening a net bag can help the animal feel more secure.

Nets play a crucial role during situations that may be unpredictable. Using the right size net can create an effective protection barrier between a handler and an animal, whether the creature is a large, angry dog, or a small, somewhat less intimidating one.



Even the fiercest of Chihuahuas can be made calmer with the right size net.

Using nets is also a great way to keep your hands free from injury when attempting to capture, contain and transport an animal. Some medical injections can be done through netting without having to remove the animal.

Using nets during field calls can increase efficiency by reducing the time it takes to contain an animal. In my 28 years of work, I've handled many thousands of sick and injured raccoons and countless other animals. I have never had an animal chew through the small mesh of a net, nor have I ever had a net ripped open by a heavy animal.

Handling Multiple Animals

Nets can provide a major assist in situations involving multiple animals, such as hoarding cases with lots of cats. In the clutter and chaos of a hoarder's house, there is always a desire to get the animals out of

the situation quickly, but remember that by going slowly, you'll be safer.

It's often best to start with quiet, gentle removal techniques. Wearing protective gloves, you can usually pick up the kittens and the friendly adults. Nets come in when you have more fearful animals, providing a quiet, humane way to capture them. By limiting escape routes and closing off rooms, you can limit your work to certain areas of the building at a time. This will reduce the number of cats escaping into other parts of a structure, which makes your job easier and keeps the cats in those other areas from growing more nervous when they see their mates being contained.

Nets can be slipped easily under beds and even catch cats jumping across the tops of furniture. To free up your net, you can carefully transfer captured cats to carriers with sliding guillotine doors (as seen in some wire animal transport carriers and feral cat dens). Always back the carrier against a wall to prevent it from sliding, or position the carrier vertically in order to lower the cat into the carrier from the net. (Cats often go much easier into a carrier rear end first instead of headfirst.) This type of transfer is not easy if the cat is semiwild or fearful, so it usually requires practice, two animal handlers working together and proper bite-resistant gloves.

In multiple-animal situations, creating natural pathways to funnel animals into nets can help save time. Indoors, this can be done by arranging boxes or furniture to "flow" the animals in the direction you want them to go. Or use one of the indoor doorways, holding the net ready and just out of obvious sight, but in the pathway, at ground level. While trying to escape, the cat will run the pathway of least resistance that you have created and be funneled toward you.

Again, go slow and be safe. When using nets, there is no need to chase animals. It only wastes your energy, increases your risk of injury and adds to the animals' stress. When using nets in a hoarding situation,



Carry tote boxes with blankets in your vehicle; these can provide a soft, dark place for the netted animal to remain during transport.

the only fast movement should be the actual netting and handling process in the moments before the animal is secure in the net.

Choosing Nets for Wildlife and Other Situations

In situations involving wildlife, an injured or sick animal—for example, a raccoon—may be lying down and appear to be barely breathing when you arrive, but can suddenly jump up when approached. In cases like this, try using a net with a large frame opening and a bag deep enough to contain the raccoon. Placing the net over top of a raccoon who is not moving allows you to safely assess his condition. If he suddenly jumps up, there is less chance he will escape. Overall, a net is an excellent tool for containing and transporting sick or injured wildlife.



Having an animal safely contained in a net can allow you to perform some basic medical procedures, such as injections.

There are a few caveats about nets with larger mesh (if an animal can easily fit his head or paws through the mesh, the netting can be considered to have a larger mesh). These types of netting may require some extra skill and care to ensure safety for you and the animal.



Skilled net use can allow for animal capture in tight or oddly shaped spaces.

Some experienced handlers may choose a larger mesh when rescuing an animal from water, because the larger holes will mean the net has less drag and therefore can be moved faster and more easily through the water. However, there are some issues to prepare for: If an animal becomes entangled, the strings of the mesh may be tight against his body. Be

prepared to cut away the mesh immediately with specialized bandage or paramedic scissors. These scissors have a lip on the blade for lifting the string safely away from the skin in order to cut it. Be aware that in some cases, entanglement could restrict the animal's airway. For birds, a further risk is feather damage.

A net is by far the most essential tool for the safe and humane handling of animals, including birds and even some reptiles. Animal control officers should practice often with various nets to become more confident and effective in the field. ■

Peter Freeman has more than 28 years of experience working in animal services. In 1992, he founded Freeman By Design (FreemanByDesign.com), a company dedicated to the design and manufacture of humane animal handling equipment.

Freeman and Dave Pauli, senior adviser for wildlife response and policy for The HSUS, will present more valuable information about field equipment at Animal Care Expo in New Orleans, set for March 30-April 2, in their workshop "Animal Handling Tools: Tips and Secrets Revealed." Go to animalsheltering.org/expo for more information.

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