**Let *Me* Get the Door for *You***

**Crate Training: One Step Beyond**

Crate training is a useful behavior zookeepers can employ to make husbandry easier and reduce stress for the animals in our care. Crating entails having an animal enter a crate and remain inside for a reward. The crate door is then closed and they are ready to be transported. This easily works in a free contact setting, but what if you have a large or aggressive animal that you must work with in a protected contact situation? I have seen crates rigged up to close the crate door with a pole or rope, jam the crate door with a broom handle, and then run in quick to secure the door -and hope the animal doesn’t get out! Why risk it when you can teach your animal to do the work for you? My objective was not only to teach an animal to crate, but also to close the door behind it, thereby crating itself.

**Opening the Door of Possibility**

At Roger Williams Park Zoo we participated in a three zoo swap of White Cheeked Gibbons (Nomascus leucogenys) in an attempt to form better pairings. We were told to ship our five-year-old female White Cheeked Gibbon “Mason” to the Dallas Zoo. In order to make her shipment less stressful for both of us I began crate training her right away. The inside of our gibbon holding area has an enclosed “hallway” that was a great spot for this training, but it was covered with 1x1 mesh. I realized that I would have to think of a way to get the crate door closed and secure.

During Mason’s basic crate training I observed something that inspired me to think beyond a rigged setup to close the crate door. We were in the middle of a session when the crate door swung half-way closed. I gave Mason the cue to enter the crate, to my surprise she opened the door and entered the crate. If she could open the door, why couldn’t she close it? At this point I thought I could try to get her to close the door herself. During that same session I was able to jackpot her with a food reward once for touching the crate door while she was sitting in the crate. In subsequent sessions I bridged and rewarded Mason for touching the door and jackpotted her for any pulling motion. During this time I focused less on the criteria for the “crate” behavior and more on her pulling the door closed. She was beginning to touch and pull the door whenever she entered the crate. I continued to reinforce her until she closed the door all the way. (I used a Petmate crate with a dial latch that allowed the bars to recess and the door to reach a fully closed position.)

At this point I was very excited at her progress, but we had a small problem. Although Mason was successful in closing the door, she held onto the top edge of the door- which meant that her hand and fingers could get injured if she did not let go right before the door closed. In order to make her door closing more consistent (and save her poor fingers) I had to think of a way to get her to grab the center of the door. My first attempt was to try to get her to target through the center of the door, hoping she would grab on and I could jackpot it. Her target was a wooden dowel with one end painted purple so it fit through the door, but it was confusing to her and very unsuccessful. My next attempt was to paint the middle section of the door purple, which again was unsuccessful. Finally I decided to cut the purple end of her target dowel off (approx. 2 inch section) and ziptie it to the inside of the crate door. This she understood! It took about two weeks to transition from holding the top of the door to grabbing the target in the middle and pulling. Although she was pulling the door from the target she still sometimes had her other hand on the top of the door. I reinforced when this did not occur to extinguish that behavior.

There were a few final issues that came up towards the end of training this behavior. When I began training her with the crate I handed Mason her food reward at the opening of the crate. This resulted in Mason exiting the crate after performing the correct behavior to receive her treat. I wanted her to remain in the crate after closing the door, so I switched to feeding her reward through the back of the crate; it was more difficult to deliver food this way because I had to get the treat through both the cage mesh and the side “window” of the crate. Additionally Mason would sit in the crate and open and close the crate door repeatedly. I was unable to fully fix either of these issues before Mason was shipped out. If I had more time to resolve these issues my plan was to disassemble the crate and train Mason to “stay” – sit in the bottom half of the crate for fifteen seconds. Then I would have reassembled the crate and asked for all three behaviors: “crate”, “door”, and “stay”.

**I Otter Try This Again**

Nearly the same time Mason was shipped out Roger Williams Park Zoo received a wild born five-year-old female North American River Otter (*Lontra canadensis*) “Pecan” from the Salisbury Zoo. She had a history of aggression and we worked with her in a protected contact setting only. Pecan had been crate trained at her previous institution where they used a stick to close the crate door and secure it. I used this method to move Pecan once and it worked fine since the mesh in her exhibit was large enough to fit my hand through to latch the door. But when we moved her to a different exhibit the mesh was again 1x1 which left me unable to fit my hand through to secure the crate door. I was excited to attempt to train this behavior with a different species, but I knew it would be more challenging.

I began by creating a handle that Pecan would be able to bite on and pull the door. I found some semi-rigid plastic tubing and cut an approximately three inch section. This tubing was durable enough that an otter would not be able to bite through it. I attached the tube to a clip using three zipties (forming a triangle with the tube hanging horizontally at the bottom). I then clipped this handle to the exhibit mesh and began training Pecan to target to it. I had to stick a small smelt into the tube in order to encourage her to bite it. She caught on almost immediately and the “bite” behavior was established after a few sessions. The keepers at the Salisbury Zoo had also trained a great “hold” behavior and that was added after “bite” to extend the amount of time she held onto the handle. I combined these two behaviors and then worked on adding “bite” after “crate”, with the crate positioned next to the handle clipped to the mesh. Pecan would enter the crate on command, turn around, step her two front paws outside of the crate, and bite the handle. Everything was working very well up to this point.

For my next step I affixed the crate door to the mesh and clipped the handle to it. We repeated the “crate” and “bite” commands with added reinforcement for any movement of the door. This was followed by reinforcing Pecan only when she made attempts to close the crate door. It was at this point that I made an error and caused both Pecan and myself some frustration. I fully assembled the crate with the door attached and the handle clipped to the inside. Pecan repeated her prior behaviors: enter the crate, turn around, step two paws out, bite on handle, and pull. I mistakenly focused on and rewarded door movement rather than the movement of the otter. Pecan would use her head and neck to jerk the door towards her but kept both front feet stationary. Once she was rewarded for this behavior there was no way for her to improve it except for jerking the door harder. This did lead to the door almost closing occasionally. Dr. Vint Virga, RWPZ’s training consultant observed a session and noted both of our frustrations. He suggested we take a step back and work on the “pull” behavior. We decided to attach the handle through the mesh with a bungee so Pecan could have more movement while pulling. I set up the bottom half of her crate near the handle and rewarded Pecan for biting and walking back into the crate. This progressed into her pulling the handle into a door-less crate and finally attaching the handle to the fully assembled crate door. The big difference during these steps was that instead of rewarding Pecan for door movement, I was rewarding her for foot movement: first one step back, then another, then both paws in the crate doorway, and finally both paws totally inside the crate. We worked on completing all three behaviors seamlessly with verbal cues “crate”, “bite”, and “pull”.

At this point Pecan had all the behaviors learned but a few technical aspects weren’t working correctly. In order for her to grab the handle Pecan had to push the door all the way open so she could nuzzle it up with her nose first. This meant that if she got the door only partially closed and I asked her to “bite” and “pull” again she would have to open the crate door all the way and start over. To remedy this I took the tubing off the zipties and put a small bolt through it. The handle now attached to the inside of the door and stuck out perpendicularly about two inches. Now she could grab the handle without so much door movement and the door was more responsive to her movement. The other problem she had was getting the door to close all the way. The gibbon, Mason, had slammed the door so hard that it would sometimes pop back open, so I did not experience this problem before. While training Pecan one of our animal care interns observed the problem. There was a tiny lip on the crate opening that the door was catching on. I found a small socket from a wrench set that I placed the bottom bar of the door through. It lifted the door up just enough to help it swing freely. After that adjustment, I placed the crate back into the exhibit and Pecan was able to perform the series of behaviors perfectly. Success!