





GROUNDED?

THE FUTURE OF ANIMAL TRANSPORT

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

We used to be a perfect match. But the decades-long relationship between the airline industry and the zoo and aquarium community has hit a rocky patch. After many years of being the primary transporters of wildlife domestically and abroad, several airlines are reexamining the role they want to play in this effort.



“FOR FIFTY YEARS the airlines have been the safest, most humane, and expeditious way of moving animals from point A to point B,” said Marshall Meyers, chair of the International Air Transport Association’s (IATA) Live Animals and Perishables Board’s Advisory Committee. “Animal transport has been extensively regulated by the United States Department of Agriculture and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and it hasn’t been a problem.”

The statistics confirm that. According to Steve Olson, senior vice president of government affairs at the Association of Zoos and Aquariums, an AZA survey of roughly 80 AZA-accredited zoos and aquariums conducted in 2018 revealed that out of 80,000 specimens sent on 11,000 transports over the past five years, the number of incidents resulting in animal health issues or mortality was below one percent.

And there’s the rub. Zoo- and aquarium-related animal transport has proven to be careful and safe, and it was not

the catalyst for United Airlines’ temporary suspension of all animal transports or the tighter restrictions being considered by Delta Airlines and American Airlines. But even though we are not the cause, we are definitely feeling the impact.

“We’re not where the airlines make their money,” said Lynn McDuffie, animal records and regulatory affairs manager at Disney’s Animal Kingdom in Orlando, Fla. “We are not a huge part of their business, but we are hugely affected. We’re an unintended consequence. It’s a hard situation to be in.”

Success to Standstill

The Guam rail project is just one example that highlights the important role that an airline can play in a conservation effort. Continental Airlines was the original carrier used to transport chicks being bred in the U.S. for release on Rota, an island close to Guam, with a goal of preventing the extinction of the species. After a 2010 merger, United Airlines became the carrier for the project.

“United is the only airline that goes from a U.S. port to Guam without

connecting through an international airport, which would require international permitting and a whole additional level of bureaucracy,” said Scott Newland, curator of birds, Sedgwick County Zoo in Wichita, Kan.

“The birds have pre-release assessments before leaving Orlando. When they get to San Francisco, United puts the birds into a special holding area and our partners at the San Francisco Zoo provide the birds with fresh food and water. They stay there overnight and the next morning they leave for Honolulu, where other partners give them food and water. After staying overnight there, they go to Guam the next day. The route is so good because people are caring for the birds every eight hours.”

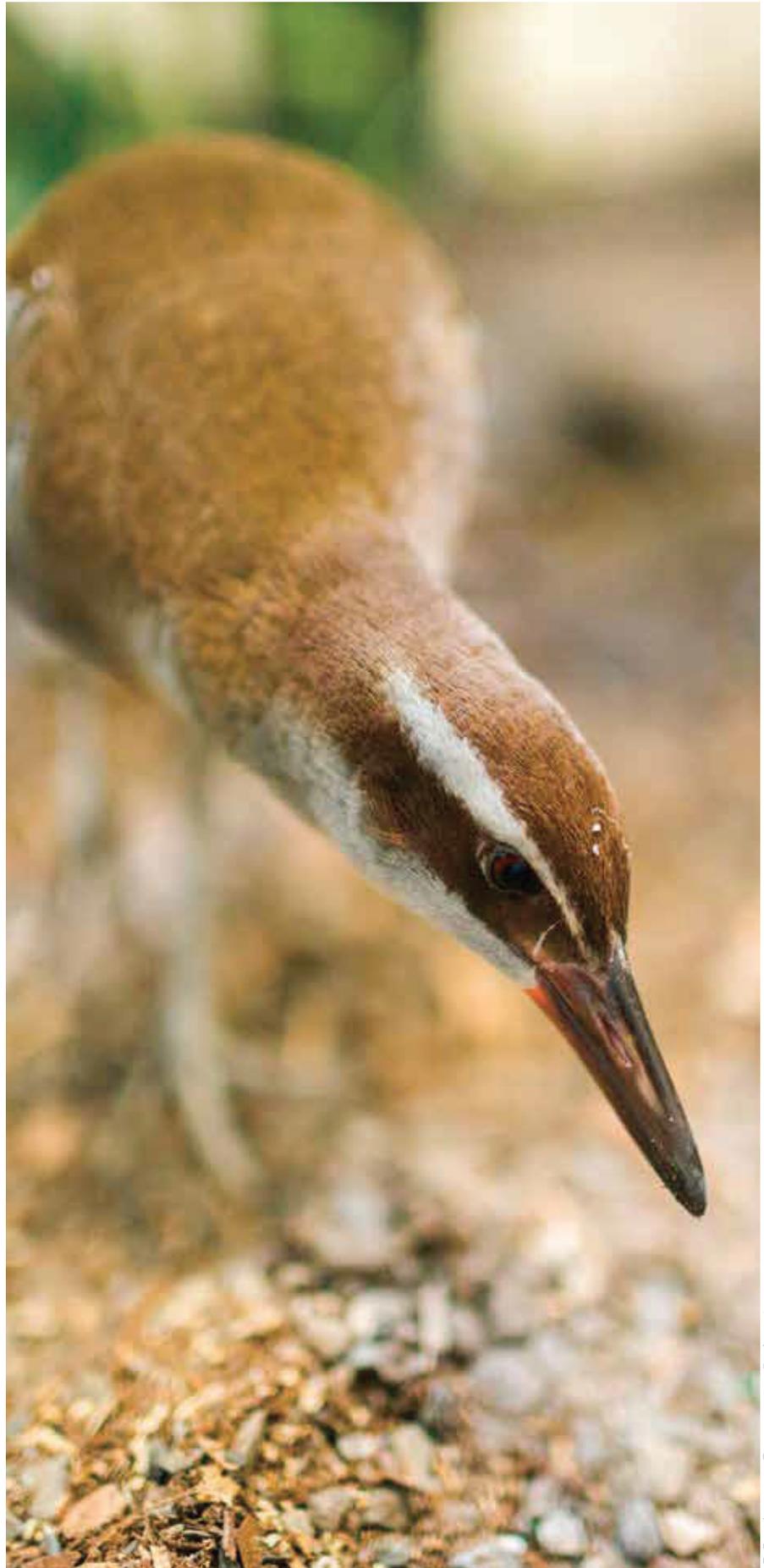
Because zoo animal transport isn’t a major part of airline cargo business, the airlines may not fully realize how critical they are to zoo and aquarium conservation efforts. United’s temporary embargo, which began last spring, has had a significant impact on the Guam rail project.

“We had 24 birds we planned to send in 2018 and the first seven were in Orlando ready to go when United made its decision,” said Newland. “The birds are still there in neighboring facilities. And then there’s the domino effect. I have partner institutions [in the U.S.] holding onto chicks we produced in 2017 that need to go—but because our holding space is finite, I’ve had to say, ‘Stop producing the Guam rails. We don’t have the space to house any more.’”

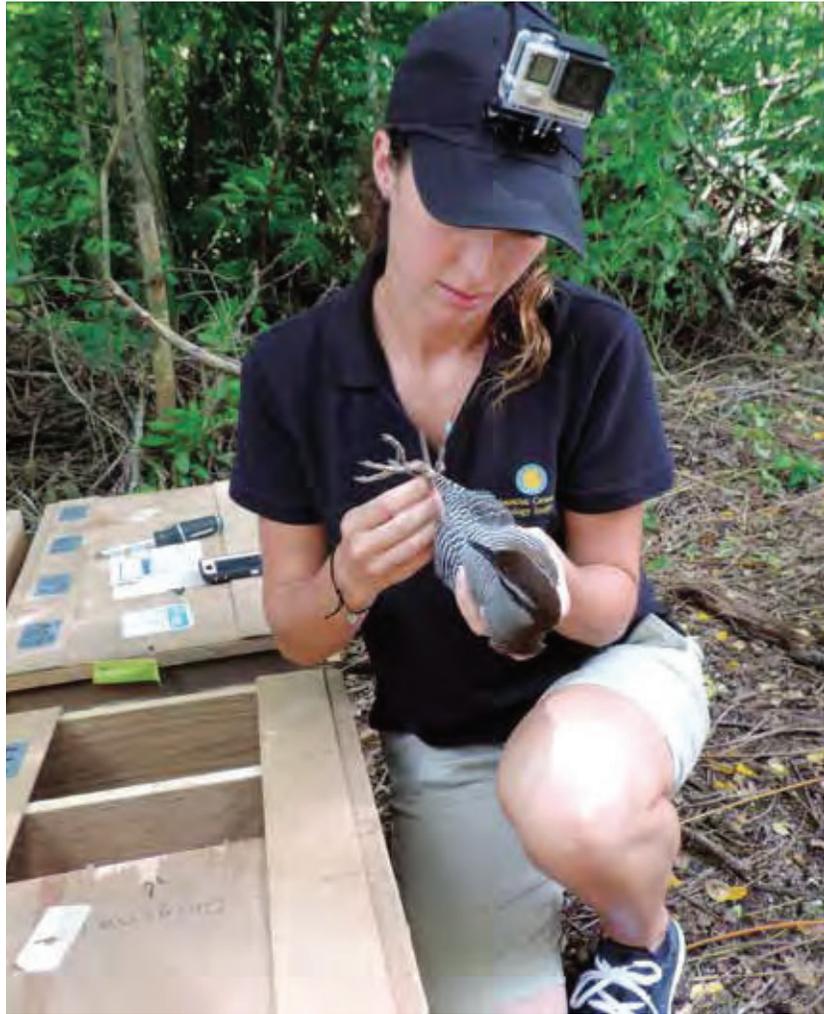
What’s Next?

With no specifics on what commercial airline animal transport will look like in the future, the AZA community can’t sit back and wait. Newland has had a conversation with Fedex, which has a weekly flight to Guam via Anchorage. “It exists, but it isn’t ideal,” he said. “And it might not be a possibility for financial reasons. I’ve also had a preliminary conversation with the military, but that hasn’t gone anywhere yet.”

As for progress on the Guam rail effort? “The facility on Guam can still produce chicks for release. We just can’t do our part.”



“There’s a lot to consider ... How quickly do you have to move the animals? What’s the length of transport time? The animals have to be fed. If you’re going by truck, it depends on what you’re moving. What’s the size of the crate? Is it going to fit? And would I really want to put a canary in a crate on a truck?”



Erica Royer, animal keeper at the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, releases a Guam rail to the wild on Rota.

Other transport options exist, none of which are optimal. Shipping by land within the U.S., weather, traffic, and new regulations on drive time for truckers, can cause potentially devastating delays. And international transports by sea require lengthy timeframes.

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She adds that charter air travel isn’t necessarily the answer either. “If you have access to small jets, the question becomes, ‘How do you make it economical?’ Charters can be cost prohibitive, especially if you only want to send one or two crates. Also, charter operators may want someone on the plane with the animals.”

As AZA continues to communicate with the airlines’ cargo branches and IATA, Meyers suggested taking the case to Washington. “The zoos do a big meeting on the Hill every year. They should start educating members of Congress and their representatives about this issue. It’s becoming an increasingly serious problem. Either zoos will no longer be able to transport progeny and participate in active breeding programs; or we’ll have to go to surface and sea transportation, which will set us back 50 years.”

Neither alternative is acceptable. Everyone in the AZA community must be a part of this conversation. The airlines are a mission critical component of the work the community does. They aren’t just carriers, they are our conservation partners. We need them and so do endangered species all over the world.

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