

Patient Tale: A Grounded Red-tailed Hawk

It was a cold day in late January when the Montgomery County Animal Control pulled up. I was expecting them. A citizen had called earlier about a hawk that was clearly in trouble. The bird had been on the ground for several hours. It had tried to perch but had fallen forward and hung upside down before dropping to the ground. Because of the potential danger that this bird posed, I suggested she call Animal Control for assistance. Animal Control had answered her call and how the bird's fate rested in my hands.

On intake, the hawk was highly stressed. It was an immature red-tailed hawk on the verge of starvation. In addition, his feet were clenched and he was unable to stand. There was a cut in his right foot which may have impaired his ability to hunt. Perhaps he had been taking advantage of a road-killed animal and nearly became one himself. He was given a drug and an electrolyte solution to treat for shock plus a vitamin injection; the rest was a matter of time. Fluid therapy was continued and by the end of the following day, though still not standing, the hawk managed to eat a small dead mouse. After six days, he was still a bit shaky but was standing and eating well. He weighed two pounds, a half-pound increase since admission.

After two more weeks, he was standing, perching well and exercising his wings. He was placed in an outdoor cage at which point he demonstrated the often perverse nature of wildlife: he stopped eating! After four days, I took the hawk by the horns (or more accurately, the hawk by the beak) and force fed him four small dead mice. That did the trick. He resumed eating and a couple of weeks later, he was ready to go. He was released in a nearby field and flew magnificently to the top of a tall tree. After briefly surveying his new kingdom, he took flight once again, returning to his rightful place in the wild.

This hawk was admitted before SCWC moved to its new location. Releasing a large bird of prey was a rare treat because we did not have a spacious enough outdoor flight cage to recondition large birds following prolonged treatment. After working for weeks with these wonderful creatures, it was most frustrating to have to turn them over to another facility for that final step toward freedom. One of our priority projects this fall is building an adequate exercise cage for large hawks and owls. We look forward to witnessing many more returned to the wild.

by Chris Montuori