

*Patient Tale: Home, Sweet Home*

Spring heralds the nestling season, a treacherous time in the lives of birds when one misstep or a poorly constructed nest can land a baby on the ground in harm's way. Many baby birds perish before they ever get to test their wings. Current wisdom recommends that, if you find a baby bird on the ground and it has not yet fledged (acquired its flight feathers), it should be returned to the nest. Most birds have no sense of smell and will not reject the baby as long as it is returned to the right nest. But when the bird is as big as football and already has the talons with which it will kill its prey as an adult, and the nest is 40 feet high in a tree, returning it to the nest may seem an impossible task! This spring, thanks to the cooperative efforts of a team of local businesses, government agencies, biologists and volunteers at SCWC, this baby got a return home.

When Mike Augustin, Assistant Manager of the golf course at Bethesda Country Club, received a report that a baby owl had landed in his jurisdiction, he was not sure exactly what to do. He knew he had to do something so he called the Maryland Department of Natural Resources who referred him to Montgomery County Animal Control. In most cases, it is advisable to call Animal Control when dealing with an owl. In this case, the baby put up no resistance and the Animal Control Officer picked up and delivered the owlet to SCWC.

On receipt, the owlet appeared uninjured and in good health. He was placed in a kennel and given a hearty meal of dead mice. Under the care of volunteers, the owlet thrived for the next six days, eating about six mice per day. Mom and Dad owl must work very hard to provide enough food for their babies and themselves! As his flight feathers were beginning to emerge, he was estimated to be about four- to six-weeks of age.

As a volunteer at SCWC, I met Duffer, so called by virtue of his association with a golf course, five days after his arrival. Baby raptors need time, aided by their parents, to develop good hunting skills in order to survive. SCWC has no way to provide live prey to young raptors and normally transfers them to other facilities for that crucial part of their development. I spoke with Chris concerning our options and offered to call an owl expert I knew for advice. Naturalist Paul Engman advised that, if we knew where the nest was and could verify that it was still active, we should try to find a tree-climber who was willing to make the effort. He commended that we call Paul Napier, President of the Raptor Society of Metropolitan Washington, to get further advice and the names of tree-climbers who have volunteered their services in the past. Paul led us to Peter Deahl, a Master Falconer and Arborist Representative for The Care of Trees, a Virginia-based tree service with an office in Gaithersburg. Peter was more than willing to be involved and arranged to have a District Manager and Climber from their Gaithersburg office, Chris Smith, do the heroic deed. Now all we had to do was call Bethesda Country Club and arrange a visit to confirm the nest site was still active.



*Chris with Duffer*

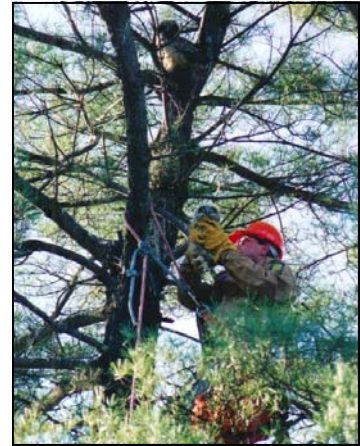


*Returning Duffer to his nest*

No problem! Mike Augustin and John Gleason, Coordinator for Bethesda County Club's efforts to become certified as a National Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary, met us at the maintenance gate and escorted us to the nest site in golf carts. With binoculars, it was easy to spot the adult owl on the nest and we suspected a second baby as we saw some tell-tale downy feathers. We all agreed to meet the following morning, Good Friday, and return the owlet to his family.

When we arrived with Duffer the next morning, Chris Smith and Dana Hutchins, another Arborist Representative with The Care of Trees, and Keith Cline, a non-game biologist with the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries and former tree climber, had already scoped out the site with Mike. They had decided to use ropes to minimize disturbance to the nest. Off we went in a convoy of golf carts with climbing gear loaded into one and Duffer loaded into another.

Chris and Keith went straight to work, gearing up and getting the climbing rope properly positioned below the nest. We could see the mother owl sit up in the nest with all the hubbub below, but she stayed put. We knew at some point she might attempt to defend her nest, Chris's gear included a hardhat and a raincoat, just in case. Chris was given a "trial run" at handling a baby Great Horned owl, so he would be comfortable with the task when he was 40 feet up! Mother owl bravely remained with the owlet number two until Chris was within six feet of the nest. When she flew, she was immediately mobbed by crows which chased her off to a distant grove of trees. We felt sorry for her but it at least removed her as an obstacle to the nest. Duffer was placed in a tote bag secured by the handles and hauled up the tree on a rope. Chris deftly removed him from the bag and climbed back down. Success!



*Returning Duffer's sibling*

But wait, just after Chris removed his gear and we were congratulating him on his work, we heard a rustling and looked up. Down came some sticks followed, to our horror, by a baby owl! I took a step forward, reached out my arms and miraculously caught the baby in my cupped hands. Now it was my turn to be the hero. Now, what to do about baby number two. He seemed uninjured and in good health but the nest was clearly too weak and flimsy. It seemed a course in 'Net Building 101' was in order. Chris, again, climbed the tree only this time the tote bag was filled with sticks and branches. Chris received an 'A' for his nest building technique and baby number two was hauled back up to the newly refurbished nursery.

We observed the nest for several minutes; all seemed well. Finally, we decided it was safe to leave and allow the beleaguered mother to return. Mike and Dean Greaves, Golf Course Manager, promised to keep a close eye on the nest and we knew they would.

About a week later, we received the happy news that both babies had fledged and would soon be instructed in the fine art of earning a living. With both parents teaching the lessons of survival, the babies have the best chance of becoming mighty hunters of the night.

*by Suzanne Shoemaker, volunteer*