

Patient Tale: One Snowy Evening

Patient Tale: One Snowy Evening

It was January 15, 2000, just after five pm on a Saturday evening and we were finishing up the routine chores of the day. Evening hours, during the winter, are usually a good time to relax a little with fellow staff and volunteers. Once we are closed, we no longer answer the phone and people do not normally just show up on our doorstep. This is the time of year we rejuvenate and try to prepare for the spring rush.

The phone rings and, like a knee-jerk reaction, a volunteer answers. We all groan and hope this is a simple problem that can keep until morning. After a couple of minutes, the volunteer puts the caller on hold and, with apologies for answering after-hours, begins to explain the situation. The caller lives in Middletown, MD and just received a call from a friend from New York who was on the way for a visit. The friend had reached the Maryland/Pennsylvania border, driving about 65 mph, when a hawk flew into the side of the car, striking the mirror. The bird was pretty badly stunned and it would take about two hours to get to SCWC. Thoughts of going home early vanished as the volunteer was instructed to tell the caller we would wait.

At about seven pm, headlights appeared in the driveway; the hawk had arrived on schedule. It was a young red-tailed hawk and he looked pretty miserable. Blood had dribbled from his nostrils and down his beak, his right eye was closed, his head turned with a rhythmic tic like a spectator watching a slow-motion, one-person tennis match. Although he was standing, his head drooped onto his chest. His crop was very full, suggesting that he had recently eaten a large meal. Perhaps the extra weight of that meal had slowed his ascent and caused him to careen into the car.

We treated the bird with an anti-inflammatory to help reduce swelling, gave him fluids, put ointment in his eye and placed him in our heated Intensive Care Unit. There was nothing more we could do; time was all we could give him.



Blizzard in his cage

The next morning, the hawk was the first animal I checked on and, somewhat to my surprise, he was still alive and standing. Over the next couple of weeks, his condition slowly improved; the head tic decreased and he opened his eye. He still seemed unaware of his surroundings and was completely uninterested in food. Staff member David took a special interest in this hawk, working with him daily, trying to get him to take food. With care and unlimited patience, he offered the finest, freshest piece of mouse and, within a few days, the bird accepted the offerings. He would not, however, pick up the food on his own.

On February 3, the hawk was taken to see Dr. Bromberg at Veterinary Referral Services for an eye exam. The results were discouraging; his right eye had a small scar on the retina which may have been due to a previous injury; the left eye was totally non-visual due most likely to damage to the optic nerve. This bird could never be released!

David continued working with the bird several times a day. During one feeding session, David announced that the hawk's name was Blizzard. I cautioned David about becoming attached to the

bird, fearing that it might never learn to feed itself and would have to be put to sleep. Five weeks after Blizzard arrived, David was triumphant; the bird picked up and ate a dead mouse all by himself.

Over the next several weeks, Blizzard continued to eat and grow strong. Although he appeared fully recovered, there was still something not quite right about this bird. We knew, of course, that he was blind in one eye but there was something more; he did not seem to react much to the activity taking place around him. He never displayed any sort of defensive posturing and was perfectly content to sit on his perch on the Exam Room table while his cage was cleaned each day. We finally realized, Blizzard had been Traveler-ized! His behavior was exactly like that of our opossum, Traveler, who had died the previous summer. Now, Blizzard earns his keep just like Traveler always did; he is our goodwill ambassador for hawks, in particular, and all wildlife in general. He has been to schools, churches and scout meetings. He has appeared on television and has been photographed countless times. He has shed his juvenile plumage and grown in the "red" tail of an adult red-tailed hawk. He looks perfect in every way, prompting questions about how he was injured and offering us an opportunity to educate the public concerning the problems faced by our wild friends. Although we would rather see Blizzard flying free and must consider our rehab efforts a failure, all who meet him would agree he is a magnificent failure! With a potential lifespan of 35 years, we hope Blizzard will retain his ambassadorship for a long time to come.

by Chris Montuori



Chris, Blizzard and David speak to elementary school children about wildlife