

Patient Tale: Diary of a Rehabber, Great Horned Owl edition

24 March 2006: A critically emaciated and dehydrated adult Great Horned Owl was found grounded in a Germantown backyard, with no extenuating circumstances that gave us any clue as to why he should be in so much trouble. Upon admission, he was gavaged a slurry of feline a/d and fluids and given extra fluids subcutaneously.



3.30.06 getting weighed

30 March 2006: I read the note that is typically left for me by Chris on the kitchen table. Seems the GHO had not taken well to being tube fed and had lost even more weight. Being the largest owl in our area, he should generally weigh around 1200 grams. He came in at 854 grams and was now down to 814 grams. Something serious needed to be done. Luckily, I had spent the winter studying *Raptor Biomedicine* and my brain was stuffed full of wonderful case studies and new diets to try. Chris warned me not to get too excited,

since in most instances, the more you work on a debilitated wild animal, the more likely they are to go into shock and resist your efforts to extend their life.

Because "my" new patient was critically emaciated, his digestive tract had begun to shut down. If I were to feed him anything "normal," it would remain undigested in his stomach. Science Diet canned a/d was a perfect diet to start with as it is formulated to be easily digested and its nutrients more readily available. Taking that and mixing it with Lactated Ringer Solution (typical fluids to add electrolytes and for ease in gavage feeding), V.A.L. syrup (palatable source of B-vitamins and amino acids), and Bene-bac gel (for probiotics), I created a very not-yummy looking breakfast. After warming this slurry and slowly passing the feeding tube down his esophagus, I realized that it should not be this easy. After making him a Med Log for his three times a day tube feedings, I also drew up a dose of Iron Dextran to help with his anemia.

2 April 2006: We are still on our Med Log diet, but now we are starting to fight me with the tube feeding process. This is an excellent sign. This means that we have the energy to spare. His weight is up to 860 grams and his mucus membranes are returning to a normal pink color. I have started to augment his diet with mouse cutlets sprinkled with calcium carbonate. These small pieces of meat are easily digested and since I cannot trust his digestive tract with whole bones just yet, he gets his calcium in powdered form.

5 April 2006: I have officially fallen in love with this owl. He has gotten more active, he has begun talking back to me (growing up in the country, I speak fluent Owl), his weight is up to 886 grams, and he is now taking small, whole mice for dinner. I was still sticking with his slurry for breakfast, which he has now resigned to taking without too much protest, but lunch and dinner are now consisting of whole mice.



4.5.06 eating!

The following morning I found a perfect little owl pellet in his cage, proof that his digestive tract is now working normally.

14 April 2006: His weight is now up to 1116 grams. He was put on a regime of anti-parasitic medication in order to clear out anything that might have been the root of his problem. I had been exercising him daily by holding his legs and letting him flap his wings so that he can start building up his flight muscles. He is now down to a once a day meal of mice, typical of our owls, and I am starting to think about moving him into the outdoor raptor cage.

18 April 2006: The GHO is now off of his anti-parasitic medication and his feces are normal. I never suspected anything to be wrong with him, parasite-wise, as his feces when he originally came in never showed any signs of abnormality. Chris and I have been talking about him (actually, I have mostly been boasting about him), and we have come to the conclusion that he was probably last years baby and just happened to pick a territory in a neighborhood that was unsuitable to handle such a large predator. Our outdoor raptor cage was still being occupied by a Red-tailed Hawk, but once he gets released, I can move "my" owl out there.

22 April 2006: The Red-tail has gone home to his wife and I have scrubbed clean and set up new cage furniture in the outdoor raptor cage. With this clean and beautifully set up cage, I (drum roll, please) moved the GHO outside. So very exciting. A month's of hard labor coming to fruition. All of our exercising has paid off and he is flying very nicely around the cage, landing gracefully and taking off swiftly. I talked with Chris again and have gotten permission to release him on my property in Poolesville, as my farm is surrounded by creeks and woods, all Seneca Creek State Park property. I have not had a Great Horned there in many years and would love to know that "my" boy can come home with me.



4.22.06: in pre-release cage

1 May 2006: The baby Great Horned Owl that came in two weeks before "my" owl also has been moved outside, and I must say, the two of them make a cute little pair. The adult perches on his favorite branch, looking very stately, while the still fluffy baby clacks away from his hiding spot in the box. Pending nice weather, I am hoping to take the adult to release in the next couple of weeks.

12 May 2006: Since our flying is now spectacular and our weight is now up to a fantastic 1225 grams, I have begun looking into means to live-prey test "my" owl. The woods surrounding my farm are chock full of small rodents and snakes and I would like to be absolutely positive that he is able to catch these things on his own and does not have to rely on a supply of free dead food.

1 June 2006: Live prey testing a success! We are able to catch prey and feed ourselves very well. He has come such a long way in two and a half months...

9 June 2006: Happy Birthday to me. I arrived at the Center early in the morning to pick up "my" owl. He was not happy about be stuffed into a box and listening to my music on the drive home, but once he was safely stashed in a quiet room, he quickly slept off the rest of the day. As it approached evening, I gathered him up (along with my highly curious family) to take him out for release. I picked a large field at the bottom of the property, a quarter mile from where the trees start. I took him out of the box, we said our goodbyes (well, I said my goodbyes, he just glared at me), and I tossed him up into the air and watched him fly away towards his new home.

by Brittany Davis, staff



6.9.06 freedom