

Patient Tale: There Are No Days Off

You would think that after working over four years at SCWC I would have learned not to come anywhere near the Center on one of my days off. Wildlife rehabilitation is one of those careers that demands that you bring your work home with you, either in the form of actual baby animals requiring round the clock care or as worries, stress, frustrations or questions that will haunt you well past your bedtime. So our weekends are precious, and ought to be protected at all costs. It took a barred owl who got hit by a car to teach me that once and for all.

I had stopped by the Center just to pick something up. I was actually mid-date and told the guy to wait for me while I ran in. The plan was to pop in and out, just barely pausing to say hello and good-bye to my colleagues. Unfortunately my colleagues are often quite a bit faster than I and before I could make good on my escape, one asked me to wrap up an owl's leg, which was probably broken by the car that hit him the night before.

"Just a quick wrap, won't take a minute. We just want to stabilize it but we're caught up in something very involved and important at the moment. Oh, you may want to get a radiograph first so that..."

The rest of her sentence, though easily predicted, was lost to the wind as she scurried away into the Quiet Room. I was left in the hall, astounded at how speedily I had been conned. The radiograph was of course necessary so that I could get a good idea of how the leg needed to be positioned before setting and wrapping it. It could also tell us if the fracture would require further treatment, such as a pin.

Luckily, I am a great fan of barred owls. With their round grey heads and "furry" little feet, they make charming patients. Adding to their charm is their tendency to be good eaters and relatively calm and quiet. Though I would obviously be willing to spend a couple of free hours working on any animal that needed attention, I will admit that the fact that the animal in question was so adorable helped to sweeten my mood a bit.

The owl and I made our way to the Surgery Suite where I sedated him and took his x-ray. Since I could not leave him breathing in anesthesia while I developed the x-ray in the next room, I had to then wake him back up and store him in a holding box for a bit. The developed x-ray revealed that his right tibiotarsus was fractured mid-shaft. It was only in two pieces and though it was somewhat displaced, could be stabilized using a splint and a wrap.

Having ascertained the nature of the fracture, I then put the animal under sedation a second time (poor guy was having none of it and managed to talon me before drifting off to sleep again). The sedation was crucial for two reasons: first, because the process of setting the bone could be quite painful and second, I needed him to not talon me again while I was trying to place a wrap very close to his sharply accessorized feet. After I managed to position the bone pieces so that they lined up and would heal as straight as possible, I splinted the leg with a large, empty syringe case that was cut in half. Finally, a layer of cotton and vet wrap completed the bandage. I gave the sleeping bird a dose of anti-inflammatories and woke him up. All in all, the "quick wrap" took about two hours, cost me the date and earned me a couple of puncture wounds on my hand. I would have been miffed had I not been so pleased with the way the bandage came out.

Due to the size of the wrap, the owl's leg was forced into an oddly straight position, making it

somewhat awkward for him to stand and walk. It took him about a day to adjust to having the wrap on but soon he was perching and hopping about as if he had had a peg leg all his life. After another couple of days he was using the bandaged leg to hold food while he ate - a very encouraging sign indicating that the wrap was not causing swelling in the foot and that the injury had not caused any tendon or ligament damage. I was very pleased to watch his progress as I had felt sorry that his treatment would require him to be uncomfortable. (Note: my monitoring of him was done on my designated work days, my weekends being spent at home with my phone off.)



Resting in our cage after bandage removal

Eventually, we took that bandage off, x-rayed the now healed bone to verify his recovery and put him in a larger cage so that he could redevelop lost muscle tone and work out his leg. His flight cage time and release all passed without a hitch; in typical barred owl form he ate well, minded his own business and quietly went about the business of getting himself back into shape. I was very glad to watch him return back to the wild and have since learned two very important lessons:

- (1) Never come into work on a day off thinking you'll get out in a couple of minutes.
- (2) A rehabber should only go on dates with someone who is happy to wait until an owl has woken up from anesthesia before going out to lunch. This person should also be aware that lunch may turn into dinner, should that owl require a second sedation. Because to a rehabber, owls will always come before dating.

by Alicia Eastham, staff