

Wildlife Rehab

Cathie Gregg

Meet the Fosters

Two of the most visible hawks in New Hampshire are the Broad-winged hawk and the larger Red-tailed hawk. Because we take in so many of these birds at Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife, either as chicks which fall from their nests and cannot be reunited with their parents, or as injured juveniles, it is advantageous to have “surrogates” or foster parents available at the center to help with the raising of any orphaned or injured chicks which are admitted. The chicks are placed with the foster, in a separate “nesting box” where they can watch and learn from their role model parent.

Hunter is our foster Broad-winged parent, and has been with us for almost 10 years, after having been struck by a vehicle when he was a juvenile himself, not long out of the nest. Hunter has been credited with raising upwards of 40 Broad-winged youngsters in his “foster father” career. Males make wonderful foster parents as they are the parent that does the hunting and feeding while the female tends the chicks in the nest. Hunter, in addition to a permanent wing injury, also had a permanent eye injury. A sight-impaired female is more readily releasable than a sight-impaired male because of the hunting pressures placed on the male should he have a family to tend to. This doesn’t mean we would never release a sight-impaired male but we would looked carefully at the species and particulars.

The Broad-winged is a small hawk about the size of a pigeon. It is a member of the “buteo” family, which are hawks distinguished by their chunky bodies, broad wings and short, wide, banded tails. Weight-wise, Hunter is small; consistently weighing in at 454 grams, which is one pound. We can set the accuracy of our gram scale by weighing Hunter. Males are historically smaller than females as is the case with many avian species.

Broad-winged hawks and their larger cousin, the Red-tailed hawks, are laid back birds, train easily and are commonly found in education programs. Foster and education birds need specialized care to be in captivity. Their beaks need to be trimmed as do their talons. Because buteos are laid back, our fosters are easily tended on “spa day” when they have their beaks and nails trimmed. (see photo below). They are well-suited to captivity with the exception of September and April which is migration season for Broad-wingeds travelling to South America or the Florida Keys. Each year at this time, Hunter will get antsy and very vocal. He knows he is supposed to be on the move and is happier if he has another Broad-winged as a cage-mate for company or if he can come into the rehab kitchen and sit on a perch on the counter and watch the goings-on. Because Hunter is a migrant, not found in our cold winter weathers, he comes in during the harshest parts of the year to protect his feet from the cold. Technically both of our foster hawks, Hunter and Laila, are here under education permits which means that we can use them

in programs as education ambassadors. With the completion of our Butler Education Center, we are seeking grant funds to build a “mews” (enclosure) to house these two education/foster birds on display at the Butler Center. When our fosters are raising chicks, they will need to be removed back to the rehab center so releasable chicks are not on display to the public, thus becoming acclimated to humans.

Laila, our foster Red-tailed hawk is a very large female and has been with us for about seven years. Laila has raised several Red-tailed chicks but is more often called into service when we get older juveniles which have been injured. And in some cases, adult Red-tailed hawks will come in for rehabilitation and Laila is willing to share her mews and her company until the injured patient is ready to be released. Red-tailed hawks range in size from approximately 700 grams to 1600 grams (1.5 to 3.5 pounds) and Laila runs on the larger end of that scale. Again, females weigh more than males and are on average, 25 percent larger than males.

Red-tailed hawks are known by their size and wing and tail shape and also their beautifully defined russet tail feathers. We once had a female Red-tailed which was very close to white in coloration, with the exception of her red tail feathers.

Although we receive our share of very young hawk chicks, (known as chick-lets), it is easier to identify youngsters when they come in as older juveniles. Your buteo family, whether Broad-winged or Red-tailed, can be confusing until you get weights on them. A Red-tailed chick should weigh in heavier than its smaller cousin the Broad-winged and it will have larger and chunkier feet. When feathered out, it is easier still because you can count the notched primaries. A Red-tailed will have four; a Broad-winged will have three. This makes sense considering the difference in size once they are grown and flighted. When accipiters come in, whether Sharp-shinned or Coopers (we receive very few Coopers and even fewer Goshawk chicks), although they may look similar to Broad-winged and Red-tailed chicks (they are all gray-white and fuzzy), if you open their beak, you will see black on the inside of their mouth. The feet are more delicate. And the disposition of the accipiter is totally different which we will go into in a future article. The personality of the buteo family is laid back, mellow and trainable. The accipiter family is off-the-wall and crazy. They are not good in captivity and make poor education ambassadors, although I have seen some used successfully in programs. And falcon chicks have what are known as “baffles” in



Laila, a red-tailed hawk foster parent at Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife.

the nares (nostrils) and a notch in the beak known as a “tomial tooth” which is used for killing prey. But even with these clues, it is easy to misidentify a raptor chick which is only a few days old, white and the size of a golf ball.

Surrogate parents are critical in raising baby hawks so the youngster is not improperly imprinted (bonded) with humans. Imprinting is an actual process which occurs within a certain window of time in a bird’s development. Some birds imprint visually, some by hearing, some as early as within the egg. Be they Broad-winged hawks, Red-tailed hawks, Sharp-shinned, Coopers, geese, ducklings, or songbirds, gamebirds ... all birds imprint. To make their way in the world successfully, they must imprint on their own species. If they do not, they will not live long. Say for instance, a robin is raised with a group of baby crows, it will grow up not knowing what it is. It will not know where to look for habitat, food, and most importantly, the songbird will not recognize its enemies or which species to look to for breeding. We try to keep fosters for the most common birds which we admit so we will have role-models available during “baby season” — that wonderful time May through September when everything furred and feather is born and hatched. Oftentimes we have people call us at the end of the summer with ducks that they found months before and raised themselves. The ducks are now following their humans around the yard because they do not know they are a duck. This is always sad because improper imprinting is, from everything experts have tried, irreversible. So if you find a baby bird, duckling, gosling, or any wild animal, the first rule of thumb is leave it alone and watch it for a few minutes to see if the parents are nearby. If it is an obvious case of the mother being deceased and babies orphaned, please call a rehabilitator and don’t attempt to raise them on your own. For one thing, it is illegal — state and federal permits are necessary to hold any wildlife in New Hampshire and also important is that it isn’t fair to the bird/animal to be raised improperly. Wild animals can also carry disease! During “baby season” we have wild animals of every species and age, so any orphan found can come here and be placed with a group to grow up with, learn to be wild with and be released with.

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Hawks having their beaks and nails trimmed.



Hunter, a foster Broad-winged hawk foster parent at Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife.

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Should you have questions about our work with wildlife, please don’t hesitate to call us at 367-WILD (9453). We are gearing up our volunteer program and that will be our next news article coming in the Sun. So please look for it in about two weeks. Donations to our work with wildlife are always welcome.

Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife is a non-profit wildlife center, dedicated to raising injured and orphaned wild animals in need and releasing them back to their place in New Hampshire’s wild. We are not funded to be a 24-hour emergency center so please call ahead prior to dropping animals off so someone can be here to take acceptance of the patient or pos-

sibly talk you through how to return the wild youngster to its parents.

Cathie Gregg is the executive director of Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife. Reach her at rehab@myfairpint.net or (603) 367-WILD (9453).

Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife is a non-profit wildlife rehabilitation center located in Madison, New Hampshire. We are open during business hours every day but are not funded to be an around-the-clock emergency clinic. We ask that you contact us to make arrangements to bring in injured and orphaned wild animals during our business hours. For more information about our work or about volunteering, please call us at 603-367-WILD (9453).