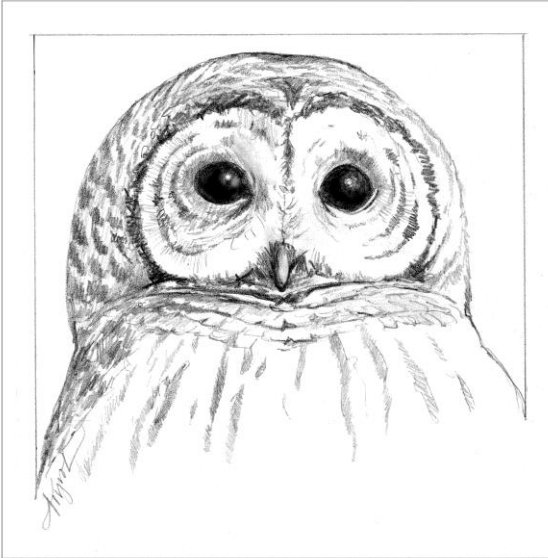


The Outside Story



Winter Bird Rehab By: Leah Burdick

An injured barred owl sat in the back seat of a four-door sedan, staring balefully out the window at its rescuer. "I saw him on the side of the road, just sitting there, trying to fly," the young woman explained to Maria Colby, director of Wings of the Dawn Wildlife Rehabilitation and Rescue. "Other cars were stopping and then circling back around to see if I needed help. His eye looks messed up."

Colby nodded, her spectacles perched on her nose and her hands protected by large leather gloves with gauntlets. She opened the car door, wrapping the owl up into a towel and whisking it inside her house, to her warm kitchen. The owl panicked, making clicking noises and trying to fly, but Colby kept a firm hold as she administered a few droplets of pain medication into its beak. Then she carried the owl into her

triage room and placed it in a small pet carrier. She explained that she would let it rest for twenty minutes until the pain medication kicked in, then do an evaluation and consult with her local veterinarian. She would also report the owl to both federal and state fish and wildlife departments.

"Can I call you to see how it's doing?" the young woman asked.

"Of course," Colby assured her. "I'll know more in a few days."

Wings of the Dawn, located in Henniker, New Hampshire, has been rehabilitating wildlife for nearly thirty years. Colby is the organization's only full-time staff member, but many others are involved, including a group of dedicated volunteers. With their help, in 2016, Colby rescued over 500 birds and 200 mammals. Her bird patients have included owls and hawks, bald eagles, loons, ducks, songbirds, pigeons, sparrows, and crows. She has also cared for foxes, skunks, fishers, raccoons, possums, and even a bobcat and a bear cub.

This time of year, Colby mostly sees barred owls. They may be hit by cars, fly into windows, or if there is heavy snowfall, simply be weakened from hunger. Day or night, including weekends and holidays, Colby's phone will ring. "I'm always on call," she said firmly.

Wildlife rehabilitation is especially tricky business in winter. The deck is stacked against animals that are vulnerable due to stress from an injury. Colby won't even release rehabbed patients until late February or early March, in order to give

them the best possible chance at survival. The exceptions to this rule are rescued barred owls that have no eye injuries; if an owl can fly and has full vision, she will release it as soon as it is healed.

The Vermont Institute of Natural Science (VINS) in Quechee, Vermont, also rescues and rehabilitates birds throughout the year, and takes special precautions to make sure that winter-released patients have a good chance of enduring the harsh conditions. According to Lauren Adams, Lead Wildlife Keeper at VINS, of particular concern are migratory birds that are injured or lose their flock. A bird that is meant to fly south for the winter is unlikely to survive up here, and VINS provides help by arranging transport down to another wildlife sanctuary in a more habitable climate.

VINS is also the frequent recipient of injured barred owls. At their wildlife hospital, just like at Wings of the Dawn, the first stage is triage. Large birds are placed in a pet carrier or cage that is covered with towels to reduce stress. Smaller birds are placed in towel-lined plastic tubs. Pain and anti-inflammatory medications are administered, as well as fluids to keep the bird hydrated. Once a bird shows signs of recovery, staff move it to a larger stall with perches and heat lamps. As the bird becomes even stronger, staff may place it in a large outside enclosure. Since standing water will freeze in the winter, wild birds often get fluids via their food. For raptors, VINS injects dead rodents with water and places them on heat disks to prevent an unappetizing mouse-cicle effect.

Eventually, recovering birds of prey are placed in a flight cage. The flight cage is approximately twenty feet long, and includes ladders, perches, and ramps designed to help the bird exercise its flight and hunting behaviors. The cage is “L”-shaped in order to facilitate and encourage the turning maneuvers required for hunting.

Like Colby, the VINS staff is careful about the timing of winter releases. According to Adams, another concern is that healed birds can re-injure themselves in captivity by attempting to escape, so once they are healthy enough to hunt and fly, out they go. The staff at VINS will check the weather and pick a nice day with no freezing rain in the forecast, and no heavy winds. “We know we’ve given them their best chance to survive,” said Adams. “We wish them luck.”

For more information about VINS and Wings of the Dawn, see: vinsweb.org and wingswildlife.org.

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