

Stranded Owl Reunites with Its INDOT Rescuer

INDOT's Jason Caskey became a hero in 2016 when he helped rescue an injured and blind owl along I-69. The story made the news as far south as Georgia.

Sadly, though, he and other Fort Wayne District Maintenance employees surmised that the owl — nicknamed Dottie — had died; follow-up conversations with representatives from a raptor rehabilitation center indicated that the owl might not live.

A few months later, Caskey left his job as Fort Wayne Unit foreman and moved 165 miles away to become the Columbus Subdistrict operations manager in the Seymour District.

"I thought about the owl over the years, especially when I would see other owls or injured animals," said Caskey.



On July 8, Caskey moved back to the Fort Wayne District to become the Fort Wayne Subdistrict operations manager. Upon returning, he received surprising news. In the three-plus years since the rescue, not only had the owl recovered, but it had become a star, of sorts.

"The owl's name was changed to Indy, and she made a remarkable recovery," said Mary Koher, a volunteer representative for Soarin' Hawk Raptor Rehabilitation Center, located in the Fort Wayne area. "She became an educational bird for us and has helped educate hundreds of children and adults about why raptors are important to the environment. She shares a pen with another barred owl, a male named Peabody."

Additionally, Indy the owl can be seen all over Fort Wayne. Soarin' Hawk has purchased a large van, and its back door features a huge photo of Indy.

On July 9, Caskey met Indy for the first time since that Feb. 1, 2016, encounter. To watch a video of their recent reunion, click [here](#).

INDOT's Jason Caskey and Indy the owl can't help but look at each other as Soarin' Hawk's Mary Koher holds the owl (top photo); Indy the owl has old lesions that have caused blindness in her left eye, and she has vision problems in her right eye (right photo).



“She looks the same, just a little bit bigger,” said Caskey, who — for safety reasons — was not allowed to stand too close to Indy or to touch her. “She’s absolutely gorgeous.”

All these years, Caskey assumed Indy was male. Koher indicated otherwise; female barred owls are one-third larger than their male counterparts, and Indy is one-third larger than Peabody.

“The day the crew members and I found the owl, it turned a bunch of big burly guys into softies,” said Caskey. “But we thought it was a boy.”

Caskey then turned to Indy and said, “You grew up to be very pretty.”

When the crew found Indy in the median of I-69 near the border of Allen and DeKalb counties, Caskey let his crew members get back to repairing cable barrier while he tended to the owl. Once he realized that the owl couldn’t see very well, he positioned his INDOT truck to shield traffic from the owl. He stayed and talked to Indy until a Soarin’ Hawk representative arrived.

“Jason was very worried about her; he was awesome,” said a Soarin’ Hawk representative at the time. (To read the entire 2016 story about the owl, click [here](#).)

Soarin’ Hawk determined that Indy had old lesions that caused blindness in her left eye. She likely was struck by a vehicle in 2016, causing poor vision from a likely torn retina in her right eye in addition to a possible concussion.

Facing the possibility of being euthanized, Indy underwent an arduous regimen to become an educational bird. For two months, the outlook was dire, as chronicled in Soarin’ Hawk’s [diary of Indy](#).

“With her vision problems, we knew she couldn’t be rehabilitated to be returned to the wild, so one of her only hopes was to be an educational bird,” said Koher.

To be an educational bird, Indy needed to: recover from the concussion, see well enough with her right eye to be able to eat on her own, sit on perches, cosmetically appear OK so children wouldn’t get frightened, work well with trainers and learn to step up and back down on command while on a trainer’s glove, remain relaxed while trainers attach and detach a leash and swivel, be comfortable around noises, and be laid-back and not nervous around crowds and trainers.

“She did all of the above and has become an endearing symbol of our raptor rehabilitation center,” said Koher.



Jason Caskey (left photo) parked his INDOT truck alongside the road to protect the owl that he and his crew found in the median of I-69 near the border of Allen and DeKalb counties in February 2016 (top photo).

Indy and Peabody, who also is mostly blind, are barred owls, named for the barring across the breast. Barred owls can hunt in the day or at night, so they have no problem staying awake in the afternoons. They have brown eyes and a yellow beak instead the typical yellow eyes and black beak of other owls. They are fed mice, roadkill venison, day-old chicks and rats. They hoot together, and even hoot with nearby wild owls. Because of their hollow bones, they are lightweight; Indy weighs 1½ pounds.

Although Soarin' Hawk does not know the age of Indy, Caskey thinks she is not very old because, in his opinion, she has grown since he last saw her.

In 2016, Caskey had never heard of Soarin' Hawk. He initially called the district office, which told him to call the Indiana Department of Natural Resources, which finally referred him to Soarin' Hawk. While visiting with Indy on July 9, Caskey took Soarin' Hawk brochures and business cards to give to his subdistrict's unit foremen and highway technicians so they would know who to call in these situations.

A nonprofit established in 1996, Soarin' Hawk relies on 200 volunteers/treatment specialists and one paid veterinary technician. It doesn't even have a central location in Allen County. Instead, it has relied on loaned properties, including a medical unit in Huntertown and rehabilitation center near Leo, as well as the homes of its volunteers.

That will change this fall, when a 1,600-square-foot operations building will open in Huntertown.

"The new facility will bring everything under one roof," said Soarin' Hawk Treasurer Bob Walton.

The 10-acre campus will feature a large recovery enclosure and habitats designed to provide a natural setting for raptors while minimizing maintenance. A spacious aviary will enable volunteers to exercise multiple birds in all weather conditions. The operations building will feature a raptor kitchen patterned after the one at the Fort Wayne Children's Zoo and complete with commercial refrigerators, freezers and dishwasher; climate-controlled space for triage and treatment; and office space.

A portion of the acreage — currently planted with soybeans — will be restored to prairie, pollinator and riparian habitats.

A large donation from the American Electric Power Foundation and several local wildlife enthusiasts were instrumental in enabling this long-overdue project to happen. Soarin' Hawk could use additional financial help to ensure that the potential of the new location is fully realized. This year, Soarin' Hawk has been added to the list of charities for the State Employees' Community Campaign (SECC). INDOT employees may start donating via the SECC around Labor Day.

Indy isn't the only INDOT-related bird that Soarin' Hawk has tried to help. In recent years, two other owls have been turned over to Soarin' Hawk by Fort Wayne District employees; one was rehabilitated and placed back into the wild, and one was too injured and had to be euthanized.

"We're always trying to find a place for these birds," said Walton. "Some are transferred to zoos and other wildlife centers to be used for educational purposes, and we even transferred a bald eagle to the American Eagle Foundation near Dollywood in Pigeon Forge, Tenn. They named her Indiana."

Caskey won't soon forget being reunited with the owl that he once helped rescue.

"Meeting Indy brought back some good memories of my crew and me doing something good for a hurt animal," said Caskey.

Those memories include all the attention the owl received in 2016.

With an oversized image of Indy displayed on Soarin' Hawk's large van as a backdrop, Caskey smiled as he turned to the owl that he had presumed to be dead, shaking his head in amazement.

"You became famous back then and still are now," said Caskey.

Indy the owl is featured on the Soarin' Hawk Raptor Rehabilitation Center's van.

