

Red-tailed Hawk Rescue

by Linda Turi, 2016 & 2019

One cold December evening my friend Rick called to ask my advice in helping an injured red-tailed hawk he found in the woods near his home in Brick. The bird was sitting low to the ground on a fallen tree and did not move or attempt to fly as Rick walked in the bird's direction. This is quite abnormal behavior that indicated that the bird probably could not fly. Rick had contacted a few wildlife rehabilitation centers and quickly learned that they do not come out and rescue wildlife; it would be up to Rick to catch the hawk and bring it to them. Faced with the task of capturing a wild predator, I was very excited to help out!



Red-tailed hawks are year-round residents of New Jersey and are the most common and widespread hawk in North America. They are found in every habitat except the high Arctic. Red-tails are raptors (birds of prey) that are found in open fields and wood edges. As sight hunters they perch on fence posts, telephone poles and trees to watch the ground for movement, then swoop down and pin their prey with their talons. They eat primarily small mammals. (You have probably seen a red-tailed hawk if you have noticed a large pale bird in a tree along the Garden State Parkway or other highway.)

Capturing a Wild Predator

We gathered our equipment and made a plan for the hawk capture. I contacted Don Bonica of Toms River Avian Care. We made arrangements to bring the hawk to him if we could catch it. We set out into the woods with two large beach towels, heavy gloves, and a large cardboard box lined with a blanket. We found the bird almost immediately. It was standing on a low stump about two feet off the ground and only a few feet from the edge of the sidewalk alongside a busy road. Injured birds of prey will often situate themselves near roadways to benefit from possible road kills. The hawk's white chest stood out from the brambles and made her quite conspicuous. I wondered where she had found shelter from yesterday's rain.



Rick and the hawk size each other up!

Putting Our Plan in Action

As the naturalist and person with a little bird handling experience, it was up to me to decide what we would do. My strategy was to stay in front of the bird and keep her attention on me while Rick walked in a wide arc around to the bird's flank. I stayed stationary until Rick was in position. Sandwiching her in between us, we crept to within a few feet of her, and I signaled Rick to toss his towel over the bird.

Simultaneously, the bird leapt down off the stump and half flew, half crashed through the underbrush. Once on the ground, she put herself into a defensive posture - facing me with her wings out wide in order to look as large as possible. Her eyes glared as she opened her mouth wide, showed her tongue, and hissed. She was fierce and it was quite intimidating! I was very glad to be much bigger than she was!

At this point we took a moment to calm ourselves and let the hawk settle. A small crowd had gathered at the side of the road, and people were yelling out directions. I didn't hear them and wasn't aware of their presence until later - adrenaline had me laser focused on our task. As we got back into position, the hawk ran and flailed some more, and unknowingly worked herself into a much better position for us, as she was in a less thorny place. I tossed a towel gently over her, and she immediately calmed down. Birds of prey are visually oriented, and when there is no visual stimuli coming in, they become calm. They are not fearful of what they can not see. The instantaneous change in her demeanor was astonishing.

Ready for Rehab

We placed the towel-wrapped hawk in the box and secured it. I went a little overboard in taping up the box because I had once rescued an injured gull that got out of the box and started flapping around in my car on the way to the rehabber!

We drove to Toms River Avian Care, and Don gave the bird a thorough examination - after commenting on how ridiculously much I'd secured her in the box! Don examined both wings and both legs by feeling them and rotating them. He initially did not feel a break and thought perhaps she had soft tissue damage. After asking specific questions about her behavior, he reexamined the bird and found that her right "wrist" was broken at the very top where her wing folds (I would have referred to it as her shoulder). Don hypothesized that she may have hit a power line, a clothes line, or had bounced off a car.

At this point we were able to get a good look at her and realized she was an immature bird. Young red-tailed hawks do not have the rufous coloration on the upper-side of their tail that they are named for; the color develops in their second year of life. A young bird's tail is light brown, often with darker brown bands (wide horizontal stripes). She had the characteristic "belly band" across her body that is a distinct field mark for red-tailed hawks.



Don Bonica, of Toms River Avian Care, assesses the bird's injuries.

May She Live a Long and Happy Life!

Luckily our bird's injury was a very common one in hawks and was easily fixable. Don gave her a day to relax and then splint her wrist to immobilize it and let it heal. While we were at Toms River Avian Care, Don gave us a tour of his remarkable backyard rehab facility. He had several species of owls, a kestrel, a bald eagle and a shearwater - a pelagic bird (typically found far out at sea). During the tour I said, "Oh wow a screech owl!" and Don said, "Oh is that what that is?!" I was startled and amused that he could treat these birds without knowing what species they are!



After several weeks we contacted Don to find out when "our hawk" would be released. He decided to let her overwinter at his facility in order to get stronger, as there were no important developmental tasks she would be missing if she stayed in captivity (she didn't need to be migrating, finding a mate, or establishing a territory). It would be best for her to be safe and sheltered at Don's rehabilitation facility for the winter.

In early spring we had the great privilege of being present when the hawk was released. Don is not usually able to make such accommodations, but Rick impressed him with his concern for the bird. She was released at the edge of a break in the woods made by power lines (a common environment in which to find hawks). It was thrilling to watch her take off with the slightest loosening of his grip on her. She made a strong and sure flight to the top of a tree. May she live a long and happy life here in the great Garden State!

"It was thrilling to watch her take off!"