

RELEASING BIRDS OF PREY TO THE WILD

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It is nearly fifteen years since we took our first injured bird, trained it and eventually released it. Our main interest is in rehabilitation and we accept any wild thing on condition that it is trained and released to the wild if and when we think it is fit.

Without doubt the most difficult to release are those that have been reared in captivity. We always advise people raising young wild animals not to let them get too tame for, with birds at least, it is virtually impossible to make a tame bird wild and a great deal more is involved than simply dumping it in the country. We are left with a nucleus of something like a hundred and fifty birds which for some reason or other must stay with us. We have tried breeding with some of these and had a fair amount of success particularly with Barn and Tawny Owls. These aviary bred birds definitely lack something that their counterparts in the wild have. For a start they are far less belligerent. Then they seem to have no sense of danger, perhaps that is not quite the right way to put it. They seem to lack a certain judgment which one would have thought was inherent in their make up. Last year, for instance, we had to get a young Tawny Owl back because it was landing in the long grass and getting the grass twisted so tightly round its legs that it was unable to fly. This is a trouble we have had with other birds such as magpies and plover but have never heard of a wild bird being found like this. Another indication is their inability to judge the depth of water and we were upset to find one of the young drowned in the water trough. It is difficult to know how much of their behavior is inherent. It is also difficult to know how much their parents do teach them although we must admit that our own adult birds are handicapped to start with. We think that it is obviously instinctive for them to feed but they are taught to select their prey and hunt. It would appear that we are breeding the ideal aviary bird which is not our intention.

We have tried to hack the young birds back that have bred in our own aviaries by removing the roof of the aviary; taking the young and training them as for falconry; leaving them in a pen where mice abounded. One of the great difficulties is that we cannot get hold of them until they have left the boxes because the parent birds are so ferocious, so much so that one pair of Tawny Owls knocked me right out last year.

Last year we put two European Goshawks together. They fought each other or so we thought for three days. Then they settled down and started to build a nest. The cock worked much harder than the hen. Between them they built a nest eighteen inches in depth. Time and time again the cock tried to mount the hen but she would have nothing to do with him and he would sit on the edge of the nest mewling piteously. Each morning he decorated the nest with a sprig of dead stinging nettle, never plucking it until it was actually in flower. We wondered if the hen was too old to start breeding as she was then thirteen years old. We had hoped to find a mature hen European Gos before this breeding season but have had no luck although we did have an American Gos which had landed exhausted on a trawler in the Arctic Circle.

Relying on injured birds for our breeding stock means that they do not generally turn up in the order we would like. We have had over eighty European Kestrels in, for example, during the last two years. Only one has been a hen. That has paired up and is sitting on six eggs at the moment, so we are hoping.

Quite a few people are getting on top of breeding birds of prey and I have heard many talk loftily of breeding in captivity animals and birds to release to the wild. In a very modest way we have found this considerably easier said than done and would be most interested to hear of anyone else's experiences in this field.

NESTING OF GREAT HORNED OWLS AND REDTAILED HAWKS IN NORTHERN ILLINOIS 1969

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During the spring of 1969, 36 square miles were censused for large birds of prey. The study area is in the northern part of Boone County, Illinois. The area is principally prairie land, now under agriculture, with numerous small woodlots, no rivers but contains a good number of small creeks. There has been little change in land use within the last 10 years.

The only large birds of prey breeding within this area are Great Horned Owls and Red-tailed Hawks. Two nests of Great Horned Owls were found, each contained two owlets. Another Great Horned Owl was seen but it appeared to be unmated. Seven Red-tailed Hawk nests were located within the study area. These seven nests fledged nine young and in addition there were two addled eggs and one dead young found. Each nest fledged at least one young. In addition one Red-tail nest, containing one young, was banded outside the study area. Seven Red-tails were banded in all; three having left the nest before they could be banded.