

NATURALLY: A diamond in the sky

- By Beth A. Shoaf Special to the Gazette
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Since 1991, when I received my permit to rehabilitate wildlife, Wildlife Works has taken in hundreds of wildlings from Westmoreland and surrounding counties.

Our patients typically include songbirds, waterfowl and wading birds, birds of prey, small mammals and native reptiles. We've seen everything from hummingbirds to eagles, deer mice to opossums, and hatchling turtles to 50-pound snappers.



Photo courtesy of Aislinn Morris

Most of our patients come in to us from the public or through agencies like the Pennsylvania Game Commission or local authorities. Many of the wildlings that we see are orphans that require specific hand-raising care, or ill or injured creatures in need of medical assistance. It has been our experience that more than 90% of our admissions are due to negative human impact.

What does that mean, exactly?

Every time a bird hits a window or a power line, that's negative human impact. When our dogs and cats injure and kill wildlife, that's negative human impact. Hit by cars; nests destroyed by lawn care equipment; trees and shrubs containing nests cut down; entanglement in fishing line or glue traps; poisoning by lawn chemicals and other toxins — all negative human impact. Add in gunshot wounds, leg hold traps and intentional abuse, and you start to get the picture.



The Red-tailed hawk is the most widespread and familiar large hawk in North America. The one pictured above is “leucistic,” meaning she has a genetic condition that causes reduced pigmentation.

Photo courtesy of Aislinn Morris

But the biggest human-inflicted problem for our wild neighbors is habitat destruction and fragmentation. Tracts of land that have been territories for decades for deer and foxes and even box turtles have been grabbed up for development. This forces wildlife into ever-closer proximity to people and potential conflicts start to arise. Those white-tails don't want to live in your backyard. But suburbia has become the best habitat that many species are able to find.

The good news is that many local wild creatures are learning to co-exist and even thrive in a human-dominated world. They have had to. As an example, look at the increase in bald eagle nesting sites in our area, including some in urban settings!

Red-tailed hawks are one of the species that has learned to live close to people, and are the most common raptor we rehab. This spring we received a truly unique patient — a red-tailed hawk found soaking wet on the side of the road, unable to fly. What made her especially striking was her appearance.

This hawk is “leucistic,” meaning she has a genetic condition that causes reduced pigmentation. Unlike albinism, which results in a complete lack of pigment, leucism allows for some normal coloring in the eyes and soft tissues, while feathers often appear white, pale, or patchy. It’s estimated that fewer than 1% of red-tailed hawks exhibit leucism, making her an extraordinarily rare and beautiful sight.

Because of her size, the bird is likely a female. In most raptor species — including hawks, eagles, falcons, and owls — females are noticeably larger than males. This size difference, known as reverse sexual dimorphism, is thought to benefit breeding pairs by reducing competition for food. The larger female can capture bigger prey to feed growing chicks, while the smaller male is faster and more agile, ideal for hunting smaller animals and providing food during nesting season. Red-tailed hawks, like many birds of prey, display this trait consistently.

Before arriving at our facility, the grounded hawk was first reported to Powdermill Nature Reserve, where Bird Banding Program Manager Annie Lindsay safely retrieved her from the roadside brush. A volunteer with Wildlife in Need Emergency Response of Pennsylvania then transported the hawk to our center for evaluation and care.

Upon admission, she was examined for injuries and found to have minor head trauma — an all-too-common injury for raptors struck by vehicles. Many birds of prey are drawn to roadsides while hunting rodents, who themselves are attracted to litter or carrion, putting the hawks at high risk of collision.

After several days of rest and supportive care in our ICU, her condition improved, and she was moved to our out-door raptor barn, where her flight strength and coordination could be closely monitored. Within just 11 days, she had made a remarkable recovery and was ready for release.

Before returning her to the wild, researchers at Powdermill Avian Research Center collected measurements and banded her for ongoing study. She weighed 1,250 grams — about 2.8 pounds — and was fitted with a unique aluminum leg band issued by the U.S. Geological Survey’s Bird Banding Lab.

These bands provide valuable data on migration, survival, and the life histories of wild birds.

This beautiful hawk is well known in the area where she was found. Locals have spotted her soaring over fields for several years, her pale plumage making her instantly recognizable. Strong, alert, and unmistakably ready, she returned to the skies where she belongs. A few months later,

we were delighted to see a photo of her flying free and strong, like a diamond in the sky — a powerful reminder of why every rescue, every partnership and every effort to protect wildlife matters. On a final, happy note, the red-tail is being seen with another hawk, probably her mate. The circle of life goes on.

Beth Shoaf is the founder and executive director of Wildlife Works Inc. She is a licensed wildlife rehabilitator of more than 30 years and holds permits from the PA Game Commission and US Fish & Wildlife. Wildlife Works is a volunteer-based, nonprofit organization serving Westmoreland County and surrounding areas, dedicated to the rehabilitation and release of distressed wildlife and the promotion of responsible attitudes about the preservation of native species, habitat, and the environment. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.

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