

THE RAPTOR CENTER | *Ensuring the health of raptors and the world we share*

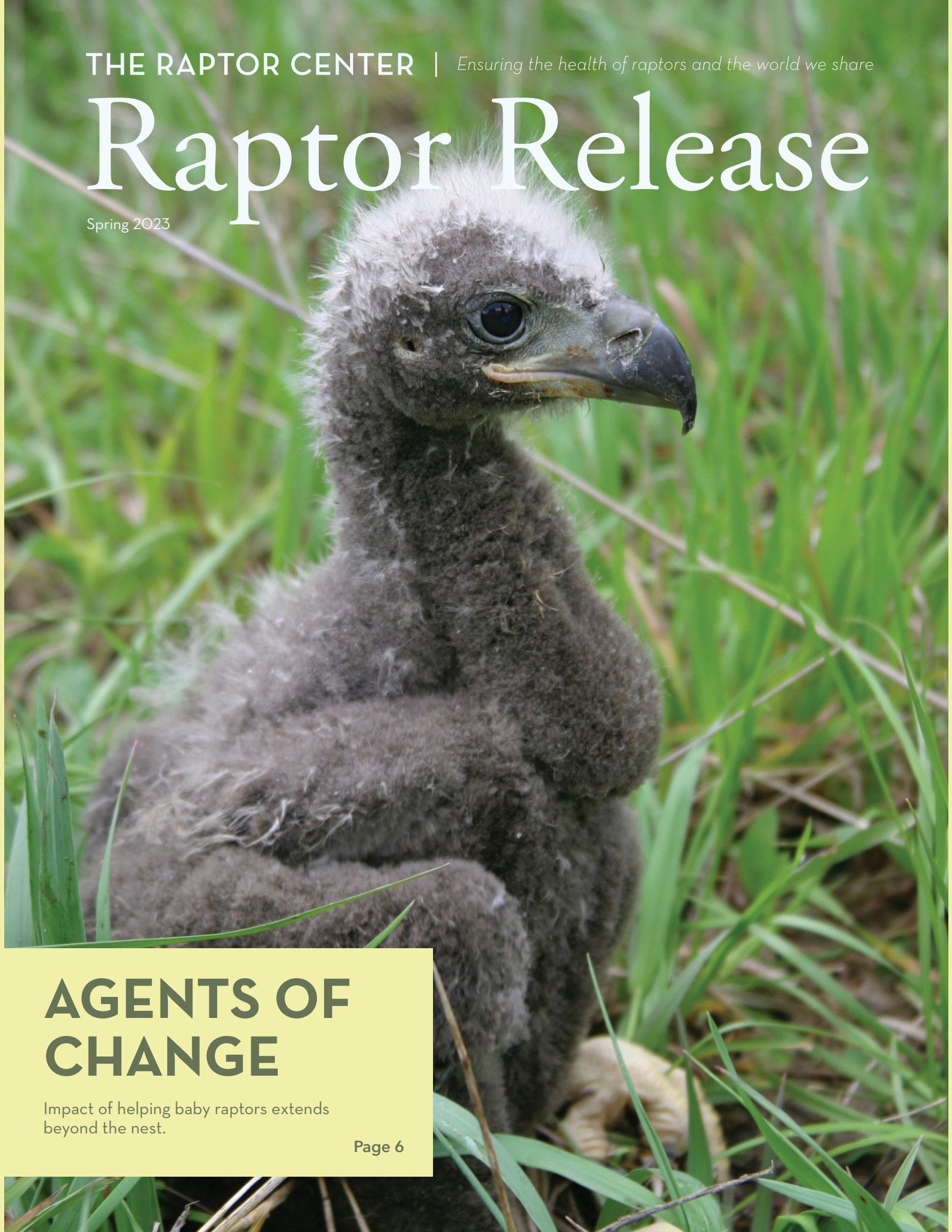
Raptor Release

Spring 2023

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Impact of helping baby raptors extends beyond the nest.

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Letter from the director

Each spring at The Raptor Center, we receive hundreds of calls about young raptors that members of the public find in their communities. As just small balls of fluff, nestling raptors invoke everything we love to see in the public: empathy, compassion, and an urge to help protect and care for the wild animals around us. What becomes of critical importance, however, is educating the public on how best to respond if they find a young raptor needing assistance. It is critical to their survival that these youngsters stay with their parents in the wild where they belong.

Baby season takes a heroic amount of effort to make sure that we are rapidly assessing babies that are found, treating them when needed, and getting them back to their families or to new foster families. Often, hours matter when someone finds a baby, and prompt responses are essential to the future of these young birds. We rely heavily on our crew of raptor baby volunteers who deploy quickly to assess situations and find hidden nests in trees, on volunteer tree climbers who help get babies back up into nests or new artificial nests, and on our front desk, education, and clinic staff who interface with the public and care for these babies as they arrive.

In this issue of Raptor Release, join us as we talk more about baby season at The Raptor Center. The challenges that we face managing young raptors as highly pathogenic avian influenza virus continues to circulate in wild birds. The techniques we use to keep babies wild when they need to spend time in our hospital. The unique strategies we use to respond to baby calls. And meet our new education ambassador, Aura, a turkey vulture who was found as a baby in 2022. Though unfortunately not cared for appropriately by a well-intentioned citizen, Aura has now found a new role in helping educate and inspire the public on how to properly help wild babies in need.

Baby season is truly a team effort, and if you would like to join the team in providing critical resources so we can help the over 150 babies that we will receive this spring, please consider giving to our Baby Shower celebration, at z.umn.edu/BabyRaptors23. Special thanks to Tom and Ann Schwalen for providing a \$35,000 match to ensure gifts have an even greater impact.

Please enjoy this issue of Raptor Release and thank you for your support of The Raptor Center.



Dr. Victoria Hall with bald eagle ambassador Maxime. | Photo by Nathan Pasch

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Victoria Hall

Victoria Hall, DVM, MS, DACVPM
Executive Director and Redig Endowed Chair
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Cover photo by Julia Ponder, DVM MPH

Help young raptors by becoming an advocate

by Lori Arent

If you find a young raptor unexpectedly out of its nest, your first instinct may be to attempt a rescue. Instead, stop and spend a few moments observing both it and its surroundings from a safe distance.

Do you **see** anything unusual, such as blood, flies around its face, or any obvious injuries? Are there adults or other youngsters nearby? Do you **hear** crows or songbirds making a ruckus, indicating other raptors might be close and are just hidden?

Next, snap a photo if you are able, as this will help determine if the youngster needs help or just some time and space. Once you have collected this information, contact The Raptor Center if you are in its service area; otherwise, reach out to your state's natural resource department or a local wildlife rehabilitator for a consultation.



Nesting great horned owls | Photo by TRC staff

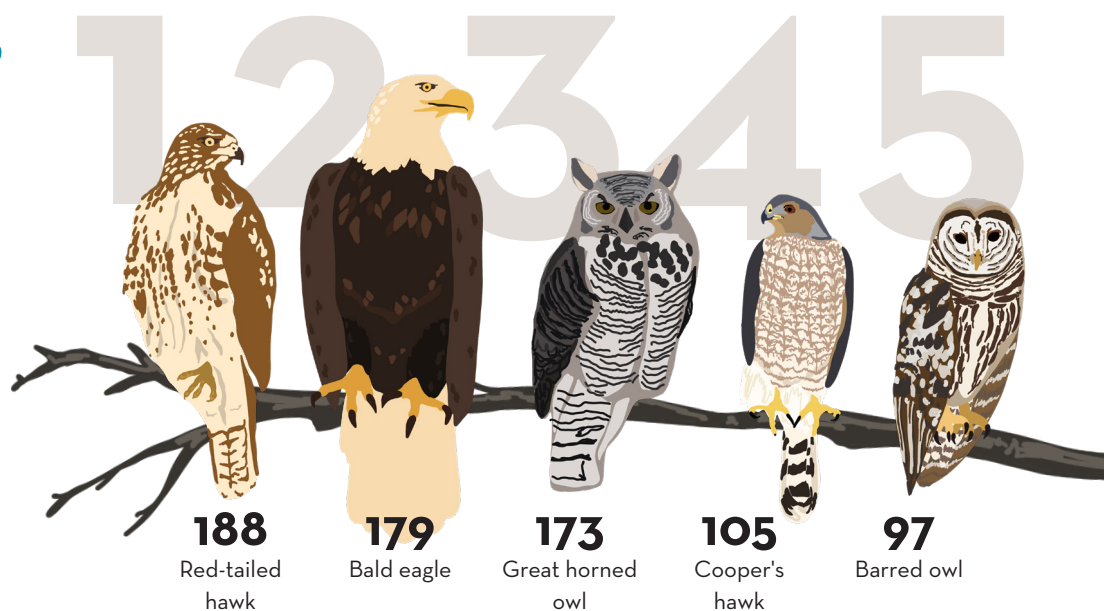
Avoid rushing in to “rescue” a young raptor, as it may not need rescuing and may be better off just being left alone. Following these guidelines will help you be a young raptor advocate, providing that ball of raptor fluff with the best chance of developing into the amazing predator it was destined to be.

Clinic statistics

by Lori Arent

“**H**ope is the thing with feathers,” a quote by Emily Dickinson, is exemplified every day in The Raptor Center’s hospital. The spirit and resilience patients often show is inspiring and fuels the clinic as it works endlessly on behalf of these incredible birds. 124 raptors have found their way to TRC as of April 9, 2023, with 6 of them being babies, the epitome of hope for the future.

2022 admissions Top 5 species



Illustrations by Daynen Paddock

Bringing up baby

TRC staff employs a number of tactics to keep young patients wild

by Hilary DeVries

Wildlife rehabilitators across the world are fortunate to work with many incredible species. As advocates for these animals, their utmost goal is to keep patients wild and return them back to nature. To that end, one of The Raptor Center's (TRC) main objectives is to reunite a nestling raptor with its original family or a wild foster family as soon as possible.

However, during the busy “baby season” (spring through summer), TRC receives numerous youngsters requiring medical care for a period of time before they can be reunited, fostered in a new nest, or released.

Staff members try to house these youngsters with members of their species and limit human interaction to avoid imprinting — a process in which young raptors learn by assessing their environment and establishing a bond with what they perceive to be their parents. If they become accustomed to human activity, these animals may lose their innate fear of humans. Being wary of humans is essential for wildlife to thrive.

To prevent young patients from forming bonds with their human caretakers, they are kept away from certain sounds and sights. First, youngsters are housed separately from TRC's main hospital ward. Second, staff do not talk around babies and do not engage in eye contact with these raptor patients.



A young American kestrel peaking out of its nest box. | Photo by TRC Staff

To block any human noise that might drift into the baby room, white-noise machines play natural sounds. As an extra precaution, staff members cover as much skin as possible when working around impressionable youngsters, often utilizing ghillie suits, face coverings, and gloves. The goal is to be unrecognizable—they don't want to look human.

Ultimately, every individual and situation is different. Since accidental imprinting can prevent a raptor's chances of being released, anyone who finds an injured or orphaned wild baby should call a permitted rehabilitator before acting. With your help, TRC or other rehabilitators can determine the best situation for that individual.



The ghillie suit worn when caring for nestling raptors. | Photos by TRC staff

Raptor spotlight: Cricket

by Lori Arent



Cricket | Photo by TRC Staff

Supporting the gorgeous slate blue wings and solid deep cinnamon tail of male American kestrels, Cricket is a popular raptor ambassador at The Raptor Center. He joined the education team in 2021 after he was presumed to be “orphaned” and was raised by people with good intentions.

Raising raptors in captivity is a highly scientific process. In order to ensure a young raptor’s physical, mental, and behavioral health, best practices should be used by trained professionals only.

During the critical nestling phase, raptors develop permanent associations that guide their behavior through their entire lifetime.

One of these associations is their self-identity. If they do not associate appropriately with other members of their species, they become non-

releasable. This was unfortunately what happened to Cricket. He was raised to self-identify with people and now carries the label of human imprint.

Instead of being a stealthy little falcon helping keep the ecosystem in balance by hunting small rodents (mice and voles) and insects (worms, crickets, and grasshoppers), he now spends his days educating people to be advocates for young raptors—sharing the message of what actions to take if someone thinks a young raptor needs help.

Interesting kestrel facts

- Kestrels are one of only a few raptor species in the U.S. that show color dimorphism between the sexes. Males have blue-gray wings and a solid cinnamon tail and females sport rufous-brown barred wings and tail.
- Kestrels are known to hover in place while searching for mice in open spaces.
- The population of kestrels throughout the U.S. is in decline and being monitored closely. Habitat loss, toxins, and predation are all thought to be contributing factors.

Nestlings and the network

P4W amplifies TRC’s critical raptor knowledge

by Rob Kulhanek

When the Partners for Wildlife (P4W) team engages with its network of wildlife rehabilitators and centers, it’s striking how significant the role of raptors—particularly young raptors—is in the sector.

Raptors are one of the few groups that are legally eligible for rehabilitation in all seven of P4W’s focus states, which means young raptors comprise a significant percentage of wildlife rehabilitation caseloads and makes their care and management a high priority for the program.

Armed with the knowledge generated by The Raptor Center’s (TRC) world-class operations, P4W seeks to help rehabilitators improve the welfare of young raptors in their care. The program issues grants to help

rehabilitators improve their infrastructure and services and provides increased access to training of best practices through mentorship by P4W’s partnership coordinator and supporting additional training opportunities.

During P4W veterinary fellowships, renesting and caring for young raptors is a major round discussion that educates both rehabilitators and veterinarians. As the P4W team plans out this year’s offerings and initiatives, both a regional workshop and a public outreach campaign incorporating information on young raptors are under consideration as major efforts. Extending the expertise generated by TRC to other practitioners and the public continues to be at the core of P4W’s efforts.

AGENTS OF CHANGE

Impact of helping baby raptors extends beyond the nest

by Brandi Rupard

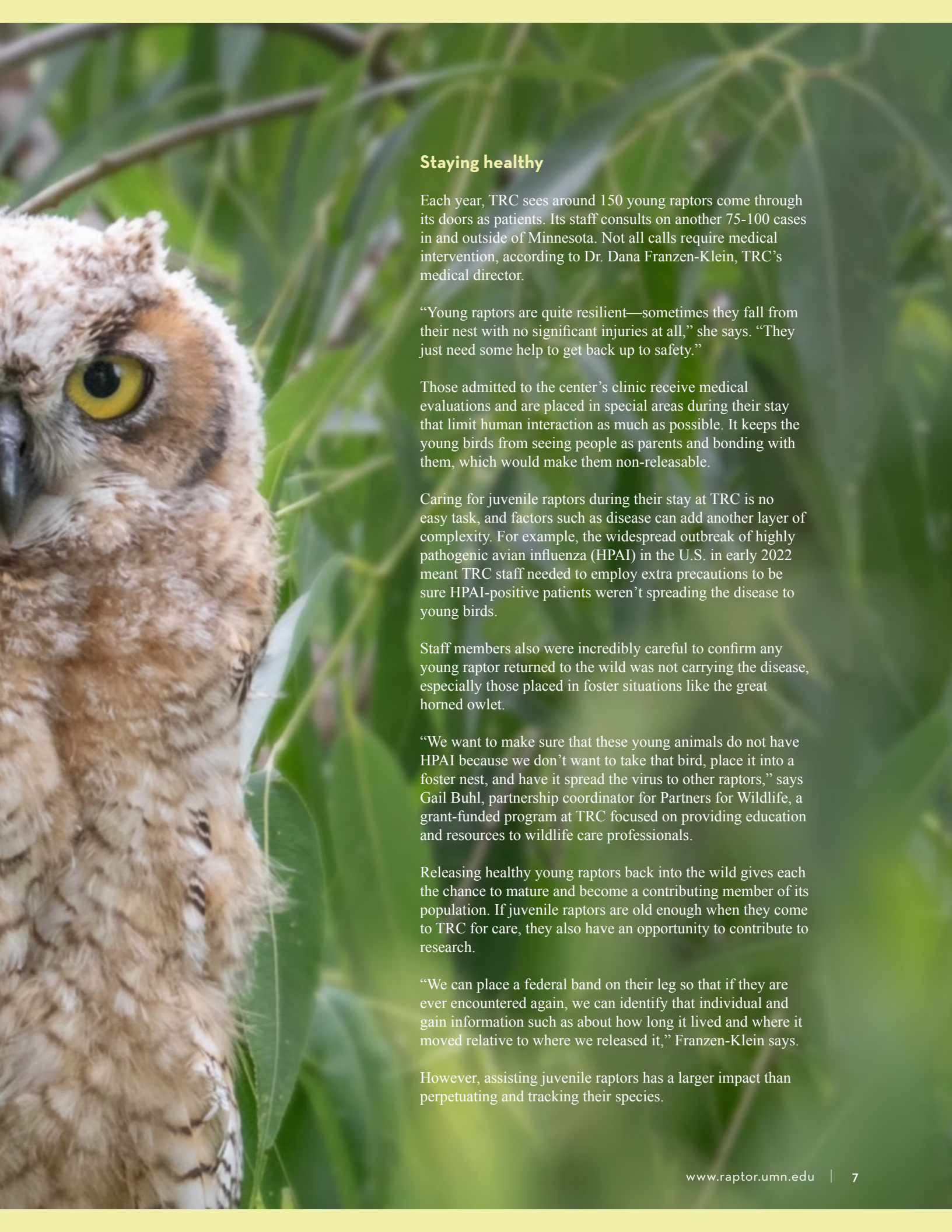
Perched on a branch, eyes searching the foliage and ears at the ready, a young great horned owl calls for its parents. The sound is answered, not by the owl's biological parents but by another pair of owls with two chicks of their own.

As the days pass, it's clear the family is receptive to adding another to their brood, and the young bird is cared for by the foster parents, much to the relief of the human observers keeping an eye on the baby's progress. It's a happy ending to a story that repeats itself each year as young raptors emerge from their eggs into a world full of challenges.

One of those challenges is becoming separated from their parents. In the case of the great horned owl, it received a second chance at survival with a foster family through an arrangement facilitated by The Raptor Center (TRC) staff and volunteers. TRC fields and responds to hundreds of calls from mid-March to mid-August about young raptors in need of assistance.

Assessing their needs and providing care gives these juvenile raptors a chance to thrive in the wild and has an impact that reaches beyond each individual bird.





Staying healthy

Each year, TRC sees around 150 young raptors come through its doors as patients. Its staff consults on another 75-100 cases in and outside of Minnesota. Not all calls require medical intervention, according to Dr. Dana Franzen-Klein, TRC's medical director.

“Young raptors are quite resilient—sometimes they fall from their nest with no significant injuries at all,” she says. “They just need some help to get back up to safety.”

Those admitted to the center's clinic receive medical evaluations and are placed in special areas during their stay that limit human interaction as much as possible. It keeps the young birds from seeing people as parents and bonding with them, which would make them non-releasable.

Caring for juvenile raptors during their stay at TRC is no easy task, and factors such as disease can add another layer of complexity. For example, the widespread outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in the U.S. in early 2022 meant TRC staff needed to employ extra precautions to be sure HPAI-positive patients weren't spreading the disease to young birds.

Staff members also were incredibly careful to confirm any young raptor returned to the wild was not carrying the disease, especially those placed in foster situations like the great horned owlet.

“We want to make sure that these young animals do not have HPAI because we don't want to take that bird, place it into a foster nest, and have it spread the virus to other raptors,” says Gail Buhl, partnership coordinator for Partners for Wildlife, a grant-funded program at TRC focused on providing education and resources to wildlife care professionals.

Releasing healthy young raptors back into the wild gives each the chance to mature and become a contributing member of its population. If juvenile raptors are old enough when they come to TRC for care, they also have an opportunity to contribute to research.

“We can place a federal band on their leg so that if they are ever encountered again, we can identify that individual and gain information such as about how long it lived and where it moved relative to where we released it,” Franzen-Klein says.

However, assisting juvenile raptors has a larger impact than perpetuating and tracking their species.



A great horned owl nestling that fell from its nest.
| Photo courtesy of The Raptor Center

Environmental impact

Each raptor that arrives at TRC has a story to tell, and babies are no different. The data staff collect from young patients provide not only a medical history of the bird but give insight into the environmental health of the area where it was found.

“By assisting juvenile raptors in need, we gain more information about what is going on in our local ecosystem based on the reason they come in for care,” Franzen-Klein says. “This allows us to keep an eye on our local ecosystem as a whole.”

Unlike adults, young raptors remain in the nest and aren’t flying miles and miles a day to find food. Adults tend to stay within their territory to hunt for their young, which narrows any sort of interaction with human activity to a defined area. For example, if there are pollutants present in sources of food such as fish, research has found it’s possible to detect trace amounts in juvenile birds.

“Fish are the vacuum cleaners of the water—they’re immersed in it so it ends up in their tissues,” Buhl says. “Say an eagle swoops down and grabs the fish to bring it back to its nest and feed its babies. A low amount of pollutants may not kill the young raptors, but researchers are using the traces they do find in their blood to help determine the human impact on water quality.”

A young raptor’s health also could point to other environmental issues, such as a lack of stable food supply or increased human presence such as construction and logging.

Impact of Outreach

Though human activity can have negative impacts on the environment and raptor habitat, young raptors can have a positive impact of their own on humans.

The sight of a young animal alone often prompts people to jump into action and rescue it. TRC staff and volunteers receive calls from people who are unsure of what to do when encountering a baby raptor on its own. Not all baby raptors need rescuing, but their presence provides an opening for outreach and education, according to Buhl.

“It’s not an opening to lecture anybody or to say they’re doing something wrong. They’re trying to learn,” she adds. “Most people have never had anything like this happen to them in their entire lives. They’re gonna be taking pictures, they’re gonna be telling their friends. So we want to make a good experience. Even if the animal does not survive, it can still be a fulfilling experience.”

It’s in these moments that TRC staff hope to effect change by educating people about raptors and their role in the world. Learning more about raptors in turn encourages people to think about the big picture of conservation and recognize that there are many ways they can make a difference.

It might start small with a chance encounter with a baby owl alone in a backyard, but every person who values the natural world around them has an opportunity to make a big impact one act at a time.



A juvenile great horned owl, old enough to perch on a branch, is returned to its nest site. | Photo by TRC staff

Flu fighters

Highly pathogenic avian influenza outbreak prompts adaptations to young raptor care

by Dr. Dana Franzen-Klein

Spring is an exciting time in Minnesota. The days get longer, birds migrate back to the region, raptors attend to their nests, and eggs begin to hatch. Baby season is here.

There is never a dull moment in The Raptor Center (TRC) clinic during baby season. TRC staff and volunteers are ready to jump into action to support the next generation of raptors. Staff members are on the phone with concerned private citizens into the evening hours to ensure the young raptor they found on the ground gets the help it needs.

Veterinarians provide intensive medical care for injured juveniles to give them a second chance at life



Clinic staff members prepare to feed nesting raptors.

in the wild. The rehabilitation staff coordinate with finders and volunteers to return babies to their parents or a wild foster family if needed.

During 2022, baby season coincided with a severe outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) in the region. This virus causes severe disease in raptors, and, unfortunately, the majority of infected individuals do not survive.

In the midst of this severe disease outbreak, TRC staff came up with creative solutions to continue to provide care for juvenile raptors while preventing transmission of HPAI between patients or to nests.

Hospital spaces were modified to create an intake and quarantine location just for babies.

Staff rapidly assessed young raptors upon arrival and returned as many as possible to their parents the same day. The youngsters were tested for HPAI at the time of admission, and staff ensured they tested negative for the virus before sending them to foster families. TRC implemented intensive biosecurity protocols to make sure that the babies stayed healthy during their treatment. These biosecurity measures included wearing Tyvek

Dr. Annette Ahlmann examines a newly admitted great horned owlet. | Photos by TRC staff

suits, nitrile gloves, N95 respirators, and eye protection when caring for the birds, along with rigorous cleaning and disinfection protocols. This ingenuity and dedication allowed TRC to successfully care for and release several juvenile raptors despite the HPAI outbreak.

The HPAI virus has continued to circulate in wild birds throughout the world, and TRC expects to see more raptors affected by this virus during the 2023 baby season. With appropriate precautions and all the knowledge gained during the 2022 outbreak, staff members are looking forward to another fulfilling, exciting, and successful baby season.



A nestling merlin gets weighed.

On the front lines

The critical role of volunteers in baby season

by *Tori Lafky*

Volunteers at The Raptor Center (TRC) play an integral part in nearly every step of the raptor rehabilitation process, and baby



A 6-7 week old great horned owl

season is no exception. While all TRC volunteers receive thorough training on best practices for working with raptors, “baby volunteers” receive even more extensive coaching to learn how to assess different situations and safely interact with youngsters.

Numerous factors are considered in determining whether a young raptor

needs help, ranging from species to physical appearance to minute behavioral details. As the first TRC representatives on-site, baby volunteers must know not only the criteria to look for but also how to communicate that information to the clinic to discern what action is required. Some young raptors are best left alone, while others may only need help returning to their nest. If intervention is needed, baby volunteers must be especially cautious when handling these young patients and transporting them to TRC.

Young raptors are very impressionable and can easily become acclimated to humans if precautions are not taken. So, once they arrive at TRC’s hospital, their care is turned over to a limited

Introducing TRC’s newest educational ambassador Aura the turkey vulture makes her debut

by *Melissa Moore*

During the summer of 2022, a kind person came across a white and fluffy young bird on the floor of their barn in Ohio. As the bird was obviously too young to care for itself, the woman took the youngster inside her home and began caring for it with the best intentions.

Unfortunately, this fluffy creature had much more complex nutritional and behavioral needs than the woman knew. As the bird grew into a juvenile turkey vulture, the rescuer came to recognize that something seemed wrong and contacted a local Ohio wildlife rehabilitator for help.

The growing turkey vulture was soon transferred to The Raptor Center for evaluation and treatment as initial radiographs (X-rays) showed some severe bone abnormalities. The vulture had a metabolic bone disease and a host of skeletal fractures and deformities. Additionally, this young bird had clearly imprinted on humans, eagerly soliciting attention and food from any person she encountered. Wildlife clinics often hear stories similar to this. A bird or other animal is “rescued” and cared for by well-meaning but



Aura, TRC’s new turkey vulture ambassador. | Photo by TRC staff

unprepared members of the public. Oftentimes, the animal does not require rescue, which may have been true in this instance, as turkey vultures frequently lay their eggs on the ground and don’t build true nests.

Fortunately, this turkey vulture has found a home that can provide the care she needs. She has joined TRC’s ambassador birds and has been named “Aura” (meaning “breeze”) after the scientific name for the species, *Cathartes aura*.

Aura’s new role in life is to educate folks both on the importance of vultures in the ecosystem and on the proper steps to take if they find a young bird they feel needs help. She has quickly won the hearts of every person who has worked with her, and guests can now see Aura in the Visitor Center at TRC.



A TRC volunteer rescues a great horned owl in distress.

number of clinic staff in order to reduce their exposure to humans.

During this time, baby volunteers are far from idle. When not actively

assisting with the retrieval of birds in need, these volunteers help out behind the scenes by creating and repairing artificial nests for use in rehoming. When a young raptor has made a full recovery, TRC baby volunteers step up one last time to return it to nature, using either the original nest or an artificial nest they built that is suitable for that species.

An incredible amount of time and planning goes into preparing for baby season, and each year presents a new opportunity to further hone the process. With the help of phenomenal baby volunteers, TRC staff hopes 2023 will be another successful year for assisting young raptors.



A young broad-winged hawk is transported back to its nest site by a TRC volunteer. | Photos by TRC volunteers

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VOLUME 42
ISSUE NO. 1
SPRING 2023

Raptor Release

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