

Mother Knows Best: Techniques for Wildlife Rehabilitation

By Samantha Moorehead
Photographs by Tim Junker

In the summer of 2004, a chimney flue broke open in a house just outside Montgomery, Alabama. Out spilled four Barn Owl nestlings and many years worth of pellets from previous broods. The homeowner, unsure of what to do, called The Wildlife Center.

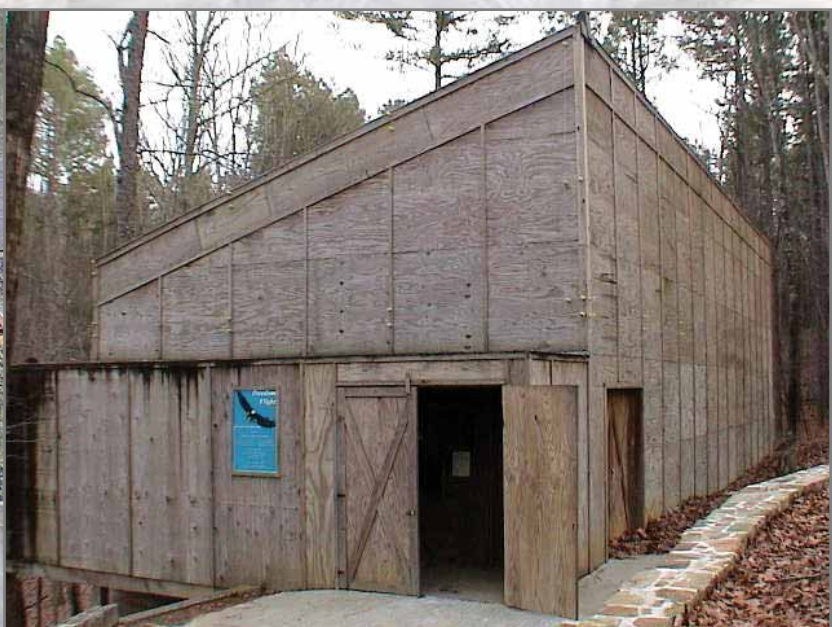
Nestled in the hills of Oak Mountain State Park, outside of Birmingham, Alabama, The Wildlife Center is the realization of a dream over 25 years in the making. Anne Miller, the Executive Director, began quite humbly rehabilitating local wildlife from her backyard in 1977. Helping everything from snakes to mountain lions, Miller began to gain support from locals and was eventually able to convert an old restaurant at Oak Mountain State Park into a rehabilitation center that not only serves the state of Alabama, but has also aided in rescues in Georgia and Tennessee.

The spring and summer months between March and August are the most trying for the non-profit center. In 2004, 883 baby songbirds, 693 baby mammals, and 139 baby raptors were aided by a staff of 6 and countless volunteers. 2005 has already exceeded those admissions.

As experienced and caring as the staff and volunteers are, it is infinitely better for the babies to be raised by their own parents. People were encouraged to place healthy babies back in nests and dens whenever possible, but often the nest had been destroyed or parents killed. In those cases, the center was dealing with orphans. Years ago, those orphans would have had to be raised by people and released at the point they could care for themselves. Now, they have other options.



Located at the end of a winding road in Oak Mountain State Park, the Wildlife Center aids thousands of injured and orphaned animals every year.



Completely funded by George Barber of Barber Motorsports, Freedom Flight is the rehabilitation enclosure for larger birds, such as eagles, and small groups of raptors.

Using special techniques, developed by Miller, The Wildlife Center can now foster babies with wild parents, provide new nests, and even call in parents to those nests. Miller's Juvenile Raptor Restoration Project proposed using recorded food-begging calls from the babies to attract their parents when reuniting them. First used with juvenile raptors, the technique has been even been used successfully to reunite bobcats and is now being attempted with other bird species.

Rehabilitators across the country are pummeled with an influx of babies during those crucial spring and summer months. Many attempt to foster what they can, but most are so busy and understaffed, reuniting sometimes only happens when success is a certainty. Armed with Anne's technique, The Wildlife Center has begun an aggressive "Mother Knows Best" campaign to either reunite or foster any uninjured baby that comes in. The success has been overwhelming with over 50% of baby animals either going back to their own parents or being fostered with others.

Babies unable to be reunited or fostered find themselves in the best of care. Very young raptors spend their first day or two in intensive care until it is certain they are taking to the diet of skinned cut-up mice (SCUM). They are placed in nest boxes containing a mirror for them to have a "buddy" as many raptors come in as singletons. The nest boxes also have one-way glass viewing windows and small feeding doors. The babies are then fed

using puppets representing the species they should be imprinting to. As an extra precaution, caretakers wear a "ghost outfit", which is really nothing more than a camouflaged suit used in hunting, but is crucial in preventing imprinting to humans.

Baby raptors old enough to sit up on their own in a nest are then moved outside to species-segregated flight cages equipped with nest shelves and perching. They then graduate to eating whole mice and begin to grow flight feathers. Once they have fledged, they are old enough to learn to hunt on their own. Live rats are released into the cage and careful count is taken to ensure all juveniles in that enclosure are indeed hunting. It usually takes a few days for the fledglings to catch on, and then a week or two to ensure they can fend for themselves. At that time, the fledglings are then caught up, examined once more, and taken to appropriate sites where they are released.

Not all raptors that are admitted for treatment during baby season are babies. Many adults are also cared for during that time, and some of them are able to help with the rearing of the orphans. A female Barn Owl was rescued with a broken wing that was non-repairable. With the proper permits, she is now a resident of the Wildlife Center and fosters many baby barn owls, and has even incubated and successfully hatched rescued eggs. A female Red-shouldered Hawk was admitted after being hit by a car. After treatment, she was placed in a flight cage with juveniles of the same species. She began to take the



This juvenile Cooper's Hawk was blown out of his nest during a tornado. Anne Miller and a volunteer built a substitute nest out of a laundry basket, and were able to reunite the bird with its parents and sibling.



Orphans unable to be reunited or fostered, such as this Barn Owl, are raised at the Wildlife Center, taught to hunt, and then released into the wild.

mice placed by “ghosted” staff and feed them to the babies in the cage.

In the case of the Montgomery owlets, they were brought to the center for an examination and deemed to be healthy and uninjured. The problem was there was no nest for them to be returned to, and the old one had been deep inside the chimney. The solution came with Anne’s technique and the aid of a volunteer carpenter. The pre-civil war era home was surrounded by sturdy trees, one of which was directly across from the chimney. Knowing that barn owls are cavity nesters, Miller asked a volunteer, who was a carpenter by trade, to build a nest box that could accommodate the four nestlings and their parents. A staff member and a volunteer drove the babies and box back to Montgomery and with the aid of the homeowner, attached it to the tree. A game caller was set up with a recording of the babies’ food calls to lure the parents to the new site. An adult barn owl landed in the tree within 15 minutes and was seen bringing food to the babies during the following weeks.

A family of Cooper’s Hawks in Birmingham was separated after a tornado destroyed their nest and killed one of the nestlings. Not seeing the parents, and fearing the worst, the homeowners brought the surviving nestling to the Wildlife Center to be taken care of. Not convinced the parents were gone or killed, Anne contacted a

volunteer tree-climber and the two of them scoured the area for any sign of the parents. When a Cooper’s Hawk was spotted in the area, she decided to try for the reunion.

A new nest was made out of an old laundry basket fitted with branches and leaves. The tree-climber then trekked up 40 feet to where the old nest had been located, and attached the new nest. Once the baby was placed in it, his recorded food-begging call was played over a game caller. Within an hour a female Cooper’s Hawk landed on the nest. When staff members followed up on the case a week later, they were surprised to find *another* juvenile Cooper’s Hawk sitting in the nest with the original nestling. Most likely another sibling who survived the storm, he had made his way to the new nest where both parents were seen taking care of the two babies.

The Montgomery and Birmingham cases were two of many successful placements of babies that would have otherwise had to have been raised and released by people. Parents who have lost babies have been known to stay around a nest site for several days, offering rehabbers the opportunity to return the nestlings or even foster others. Anne Miller is in the process of publishing her findings in the hopes that their distribution to other rehabilitators will give wild birds and mammals the second chance they deserve. ■



A Wildlife Center volunteer and the homeowner attach a nest box close to where a Barn Owl nest was destroyed. The orphaned babies were then placed in it and the mother was attracted to the area by recorded food-begging calls.



A juvenile Barred Owl is examined by the author after falling from its nest.



**American Federation of Aviculture
2006 Annual Convention**



The Beauty of Birds

**August 2-5, 2006
Dallas, TX**



Photo Courtesy of the Dallas Convention and Visitors Bureau

**This year we are dusting off the 10-gallon hats and heading to Dallas!
Join the FUN as we gather to learn, meet new friends, and renew old friendships.**

Please visit our website, www.AFABirds.org, to take advantage of online registration beginning February 1, 2006.
The "Early Bird" registration ends June 26, 2006, so don't miss the deadline!

The website and AFA in Brief will have a detailed list of speakers, schedules,
and events, as they become available.

**Radisson Dallas Love Field
1241 Mockingbird Ln • Dallas, TX 75247 • Phone: (214) 630-7000**

AFA Room Rates: Single/Double \$79.00 • Additional Person \$10.00 • Suites \$109.00
All room rates include FREE breakfast buffet
Airport shuttle available from Love Field and DFW
FREE on-site parking for all registered guests

Reservations: Call (800) 333-3333 or the Hotel direct (214) 630-7000 for reservations. Be sure to mention the American Federation of Aviculture to ensure the discounted rates.

Speakers: We are planning a speaker lineup that will include a variety of well-known aviculturists, including:

Josef Lindholm III:
"The Aracaris" & "The Cotingas"

Bob Nelson:
"The Lineolated Parakeet ...The New Star on the Avian Horizon"
"The Quaker Parakeet ... Fascinating Aviary Subject ...Enchanting Pet"

Dick Schroeder:
"Lories: Past, Present & Future"

Check out the updated list of speakers and topics at www.AFABirds.org.

Make plans now to attend a convention to remember!

For more Convention information, please contact the AFA: P.O. Box 159, Rossville, TN 38066
E-mail: ConventionCentral@idealbirds.com or visit the AFA website: www.AFABirds.org
Phone: (901) 853-6079 • Fax: (901) 853-8452



AFA STORE

KITCHEN WARE



APPAREL



TINS



PLATES



CHECK OUT MORE MERCHANDISE AT
WWW.AFABIRDS.ORG/AFASTORE