

Raptor Rescue proves difficult

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It was 17 degrees and snowing a steady, light, curtain-like snow. Because of that, I didn't see him at first. It was my dog who alerted me, when it bounded over and huffed at me, and then cautiously sat, staring at a startling image.

Christ-like, a ghost was suspended in mid-air, staring with piercing, orange, angry eyes. It was a youthful Great Horned Owl, wings outstretched, skewered on our barbed wire fence.

On this Saturday morning, I had no idea that the perfect storm of circumstance was brewing. All I knew was that this bird was going to freeze if we didn't do something, and the less my family touched the owl, the better.

I called our local wildlife officer, who was in the field, out of range. As Game, Fish & Parks dispatchers paged the officer, my husband and our friend, both wildlife savvy, confirmed that easy disengagement of Owl was impossible.

A second call to GF&P was intended to get information about a raptor rescue place we had heard about. The comedy of errors began when dispatch provided two wrong numbers.

Then the emergency vet, the Humane Society and Reptile Gardens were all either closed or oddly unable to provide any useful information. A Bear Country employee knew the first name of the Rescue Lady, and a former Reptile Gardens employee we know remembered her last name. After an internet search, I left a message.

Meanwhile, it was freezing. We covered the bird with a towel, cut the wire, and put the skewered owl in a box in my warm car. This turned out to be right.

Living in hope for a call from the rescue lady – Maggie Engler of Wildlife Experiences – I headed toward Rapid City. The police officer I saw on the way suggested calling the Humane Society. I would find out later that the Humane Society, like most veterinarians, is not licensed to work with birds of prey. Unlicensed facilities can get in legal trouble for holding these birds.

I finally dialed one last idea: falconer Dan O'Brien. Serendipitously, he sits on the rescue lady's board of directors, and within minutes I was heading to the board's veterinarian.

In several ensuing conversations I had with rescue lady, I learned that the Rapid City facility is the only licensed raptor rehabilitation center in western South Dakota, eastern Wyoming, and northwestern Nebraska.

She said that about 40 -70 injured birds of prey are treated there each year, most of whom are caught on fences or electrical lines, or they crash into cars or buildings. Predictably, most have wing injuries.

I also learned that even more animals are not treated because community members are afraid to carry these protected raptors in their cars.

While it's true the protective laws are in place, people can still help injured birds – if they do it correctly.

First, start with GF&P. They are responsible for recovering birds and taking them to Wildlife Experiences. But what if the officer is unavailable?

“If you're a citizen who is trying to save a bird, we can walk you through picking it up safely,” Engler Said. “And if you're questioned by authorities while in transit, you can simply identify the places you've called. Explain what's happening.”

Turns out if you dial the on-site number at Wildlife Experiences, or its permitted vet, people answer seven days a week. The web site notes that it might take a bit of time for a return call, and that concerned citizens should leave a detailed message; staff who are busy caring for resident animals make sure to check messages during the day.

The work done by the facility includes educational and school programming, and the crucial, ongoing care and rehabilitation of birds. About 25 percent of the treated raptors are healed sufficiently enough to be re-released near where they were found, so that they can return to their territories.

The contributions of facilities like Wildlife Experiences help biologists maintain population numbers of species that can use every member they have, including bald and golden eagles, goshawks and ferruginous hawks.

Unfortunately many birds die, despite everyone's best efforts – like the owl I tried to save, which suffered a deadly gangrenous infection from the wire in his wing.

“But we have to keep trying,” Engler says. “We created the problems that injure these birds, and we're asking them to co-exist with us. For example, they didn't evolve with an understanding of barbed wire.”

No kidding. And to help the average person do his or her part, and avoid my perfect storm, Engler is now in the process of reminding all area veterinarians, animal care facilities, and law enforcement offices of her correct contact information.

Sidebar: Non-profit group Wildlife Experiences to raise funds

The nonprofit Wildlife Experiences requires \$12 a day just to feed convalescing raptors; operating and veterinarian expenses, as well as educational program for schools, are funded through donations.

Their annual fundraiser will be April 18, from 5:30pm to 9pm at Prairie Edge. For more information, for fundraiser tickets, or to help a bird in need, contact Wildlife Experiences at 605-341-2762, 605-381-9707, or www.wildlife-experiences.org. Dakota Hills Veterinary at 605-342-7498, or the Game, Fish, and Parks regional office at 605-394-2391.