

Odette Curtis & Andrew Jenkins

# A DELICATE BALANCE...

## Raptor Rehabilitation

The paradox of city living applies as much to raptors in urban and suburban environments as it does to their human counterparts: the lure of the city's wealth of resources and opportunities is offset by the perils of life on the street. For some raptors these environments provide an abundance of food (for example, city and garden birds) and nest sites, which often results in raptors taking up residence in and among city buildings, suburban gardens and exotic plantations.

The downside is that these radically transformed environments feature a variety of hazards and many raptor city-dwellers die or are injured in collisions with overhead lines or cars, or are electrocuted, shot or poisoned. Many injured raptors are recovered and taken to urban animal rescue hospitals each year. Despite their fearsome appearance, raptors are delicate, specialised animals that are often very difficult to treat. Considerable expertise and dedicated facilities are therefore required to nurse, house and 'repair' these birds. First prize in this process is the successful rehabilitation of the patient. ▶





ODETTE CURTIS (2)

**Above** Despite the robust appearance of raptors like the African Goshawk, they are fragile and often difficult to treat.

**Previous page** A recently rehabilitated Rock Kestrel contemplates the freedom of the 'outside world'.

### The value of rehabilitation

The term 'successful rehabilitation' is regarded by many as 'the release of a rehabilitated animal back into the wild, resulting in that animal entering (or re-entering) the breeding population'. It is generally recognised that rehabilitation in itself has minimal direct conservation value. Once a specialised predatory bird with notable injuries is admitted, it is effectively 'crossed off Mother Nature's scoreboard' and stands little chance of being rehabilitated successfully. Rehabilitation is an expensive process, in terms of the costs involved in setting up aviaries and flight cages, maintaining a supply of the correct food and medicine, as well as the amount of time spent on each animal requiring treatment. It is therefore vital that the bird be critically assessed as early as possible so that time and resources are expended on the small percentage of individuals whose prognosis is fairly good.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the rehab process lies in what can be learnt about threats to raptor populations, using the information collected from casualties. Relative frequencies of injuries and illnesses reflect the kinds of hazards

present in raptor habitats. For example, if a relatively large number of birds of prey that have injuries sustained in collisions has been recovered from the vicinity of a powerline, it may well suggest that a section of overhead line is particularly dangerous to local raptors. The electricity supplier could then be approached to rectify this situation. Thus, by collecting the appropriate information from raptor casualties the value of rehabilitation can be far greater than the mere rescue, first-aid and nursing of injured birds.

### The role players

There are a number of groups involved with raptor rehabilitation, and each contributes in a different way. In an ideal situation, when a bird comes in for rehabilitation, its condition should first be assessed by a vet. If its chances of recovery look good, it should go to the appropriate local rehabilitator to be stabilised, nursed and possibly subsequently released.

Young birds that are brought in as orphans and raised in captivity may be re-introduced to the wild using 'hack boxes'. These small, protective enclosures are positioned in a suitable release area, and the birds are fed there. They are gradually weaned off this food to encourage them to forage independently.

Once an adult bird has been in captivity for a protracted period it begins to lose body condition and muscle tone and it is

thus necessary to get the bird fit before releasing it. Large flight aviaries are used to allow the birds to exercise and develop sufficient muscle tone before release. But this passive approach is usually not sufficient for the more specialised pursuit hunters, such as hawks and falcons, that require peak fitness if they are to catch their prey in fast, energy-sapping chases. Falconers play a vital role in the rehabilitation of these birds by exercising them in hunts at wild game, under falconry conditions. Nature conservation authorities ensure that the correct permits are issued for all raptor rehab activities and often act as facilitators by transporting birds to the appropriate vet or rehab centre. Raptor biologists also have valuable input in assessing the prognosis of an injured bird and in collecting and curating the appropriate information from rehab birds. Thus a number of players are involved as facilitators to ensure that birds are treated by the right people and under suitable conditions.

### Co-ordination and co-operation

The Greater Cape Town area in the Western Cape is an example of the juxtaposition of the city's attractions and its hazards: exceptional densities of raptors living in and around the city and its suburbs translate into a high number of casualties being brought into the local



**Injured raptors, such as this Black Sparrowhawk, require expert handling from a variety of rehabilitators and vets.**

rehabilitation centres. Until recently, efforts to treat and rehabilitate raptors in this area have been somewhat disjointed, spread over a number of small, often isolated, rehabilitation centres, and with little co-ordination or co-operation between the individuals involved. Also, decisions on the fate of these birds have often been based on emotional rather than pragmatic reasoning, resulting in birds that should be euthanased being kept for long periods under unfavourable conditions.

Clearly, a co-ordinated process for treating injured raptors needed to be established in order to ensure that birds that stand a good chance of recovery are prioritised while those with a poor prognosis are removed quickly and painlessly from the system.

### Moving forward

Two workshops were held to address the perceived problems in raptor rehabilitation in the Cape Town area. The first gathering resulted in the formation of the Western Cape Raptor Rehabilitation Forum (WCRRF), while the second involved more specific discussions with elected forum members. Various issues were covered, with the emphasis being placed on the identification of expertise and the formation of a network of capable rehabilitators and vets, the development of a protocol for the treatment of injured raptors, and the capture of data from all handled birds concerning the location, nature and causes of injuries sustained, in order to develop effective conservation and management priorities.

A network of rehabilitators and vets involved in rehab activities has now been defined and the protocol for the treatment of injured birds of prey is in the process of being finalised. These documents will be circulated among all parties involved and distributed at places where raptors are likely to be brought in by the general public (for example, police stations, SPCAs and other animal welfare organisations). It is hoped that this will ultimately ensure that when injured birds are picked up, they are immediately taken to the appropriate people. Ideally, a ringing and marking scheme (possibly making use of colour-rings) will be initiated, so that every rehabilitated raptor that is released is recognisable as such, enabling us to monitor the long-term



ANDREW JENKINS

**Rehabilitated raptors often face an uncertain future. This peregrine has been ringed as part of a project to monitor such birds.**

success of rehabilitation efforts. Studies on the release of rehabilitated raptors in the United States (with Bald and Golden eagles) suggest a high rehabilitation success rate in these large, robust species. Similar studies carried out in South Africa would prove useful, especially with regard to the success of the more specialised predatory birds such as falcons and hawks.

Ultimately, the WCRRF aims to develop a blueprint for raptor rehabilitation countrywide, in the hope that rehabilitators in other provinces will take the initiative in combining efforts to support this valuable activity. As already noted, the costs of active rehabilitation are enormous and added to these are the ancilliary administration expenses (circulating documents, holding workshops, etc.) and associated research projects. Presently there is no funding available to support these efforts, making it very difficult to achieve our goals, and any financial backing for this project would be much appreciated.

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### NEED HELP?

Anyone who receives injured raptors in the Western Cape (or knows of people doing so), may contact Odette Curtis (ocurtis@botzoo.uct.ac.za, tel. 083 551 3341) or Andrew Jenkins (ajenkins@botzoo.uct.ac.za, tel. 082 959 9238) for details of the appropriate raptor rehabilitators and vets.