Environment,
Climate Change & Water
National Parks & Wildlife Service

Guidelines for the rehabilitation of birds of prey

Published by:
Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water NSW
59 Goulburn Street, Sydney
PO Box A290
Sydney South 1232
Ph: (02) 9995 5000 (switchboard)
Ph: 131 555 (environment information and publications requests)
Ph: 1300 361 967 (national parks, climate change and energy efficiency information and publications requests)
Fax: (02) 9995 5999
TTY: (02) 9211 4723
Email: info@environment.nsw.gov.au
Website: www.environment.nsw.gov.au

Report pollution and environmental incidents
Environment Line: 131 555 (NSW only) or info@environment.nsw.gov.au
See also www.environment.nsw.gov.au/pollution

ISBN 978 1 74293 165 4
DECCW 2011/0155
First published June 2004, published online with updated contact details February 2011

Contents

Introduction

The eagles, kites, hawks, falcons and owls, that are collectively known as birds of prey, or raptors, rely on their agility, stealth, speed and strength to locate and, in most cases, to capture their prey.

Relatively minor injuries, such as bruising or damage to flight or tail feathers, would not seriously impede or jeopardise the survival of most types of birds in the wild, but any injury suffered by a raptor can be life threatening. Studies have shown that falcons and goshawks, for example, may be successful, on average, in only one in about every seven attempts to catch prey. As this group of birds relies, more than any other, on their fitness to be able to capture their next feed, so the question must be asked "What chance does an injured, or unfit, raptor have of acquiring its next feed if it is not near to 100% fit?" It is obvious that the rehabilitation of raptors requires very special techniques and the rehabilitator must have very special skills and facilities to give the bird a better than fair chance of survival when it is returned to the wild.

Falconry practices

In basic terms, “falconry” is the keeping and training of raptors for the hunting of game. It is widely viewed in Australia as an unjustifiable blood sport and in some people’s eyes is practiced for the perverse entertainment of killing other animals for fun or "sport". Falconry, as a sport, is illegal throughout Australia.

In the 1980s and early 1990s raptor rehabilitation techniques were developed that were not reliant upon the traditional falconry practices that had been used with varying degrees of success for raptor rehabilitation in the past. It had been demonstrated and documented that appropriate management of captive birds in aviaries could achieve a high level of fitness in injured birds, or to develop and hone hunting skills in hand-raised birds without using falconry techniques that relay upon imprinting and starvation.

Accordingly, in 1991 the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) (NPWS is now part of the Department of Environment and Conservation – DEC) restricted the issue of licences authorising people to hold and rehabilitate raptors to ensure that raptor rehabilitation is not used as a guise for illegal falconry activities. The use of falconry based free-flight training for raptor rehabilitation could no longer be justified and was therefore no longer permitted in NSW.

Licensing restrictions

It is generally recognised that a raptor rehabilitator needs to be highly trained and skilled with access to specialised equipment, facilities, techniques and other resources. Prior to the late 1980’s a small number of individuals had been licensed to rehabilitate raptors. However, most individuals who had sought to be granted such licences did not satisfy the NPWS that they were sufficiently and/or appropriately trained, motivated and dedicated conservationists who had a genuine and legitimate interest in raptor conservation.

With the advent of wildlife rehabilitation organisations in the late 1980’s and the subsequent increased public awareness of the plight of sick, injured and orphaned fauna, many more injured or orphaned raptors were being rescued. The licensed individuals could not cope with the demand for their special abilities and it therefore became necessary to promote the development of raptor rehabilitation expertise within licensed wildlife rehabilitation organisations. As the NPWS was not prepared to issue further licences to unsupervised individuals, it was decided that wildlife rehabilitation groups be permitted to authorise specifically trained and supervised persons who possess appropriate facilities to rehabilitate raptors. These organisations could also develop specialist training strategies and provide ongoing monitoring and supervision of the specialist carers. A policy decision was therefore implemented to not issue any new licences for independent raptor rehabilitators.

Licensed rehabilitation organisations may issue authorities to specialist raptor rehabilitators within their networks, provided that the criteria outlined in this document are met and that the organisation is able to closely monitor the activities of the authority holder. As a general rule, not more than two such authorisations should be permitted within an organisation, or a regional branch of an organisation.

Further, wildlife rehabilitation organisations are required to restrict the holding of raptors by non-raptor specialist foster-carers to not more than three days. Within this period a minimally injured bird (e. g. concussed) would, in most cases, be released. In the case of a more seriously injured bird, arrangements must be made, within this tree-day period, for the transfer of the bird to a specifically authorised individual within the group, another group, or to one of the few individually licensed specialist raptor rehabilitators.

Authorisation to hold raptors

The rehabilitation organisations should adopt at least the following minimum criteria as a guideline for the issue of specialist authorisation for raptor foster-carers/rehabilitators. The prospective raptor rehabilitator:-

1. must be a proven successful specialist bird (other than raptor) foster-carer;
2. must have completed a specialist raptor rehabilitation training course and/or have attended, or undertake to attend, raptor rehabilitation seminars conducted by experienced raptor rehabilitators and continue to liaise with these persons;
3. must have ready access and support of an avian veterinarian;
4. must be prepared to have their activities closely monitored by a responsible committee or appropriately qualified foster-carer co-ordinator;
5. must have sufficient property area for the construction of essential facilities;
6. must have the capacity to construct and maintain appropriate holding facilities and acquire specialist equipment for successful raptor rehabilitation;
7. must have a proven appropriate, reliable food supply source and food holding facilities.

Holding facilities

Experienced raptor rehabilitators agree that three distinct holding facility types are required for successful rehabilitation of the full range of raptors and the illnesses and injuries they sustain. It is not necessary that each raptor authority holder personally possess all three facilities, but they must demonstrate an equitable and practical network access to all three types of facility to ensure that appropriate facilities are available for all types and all stages of raptor rehabilitation.

It is most important that the advice of specialists is sought and used for the construction and management of these facilities. The three types of facilities are:

- a hospital cage;
- an intensive care aviary; and
- a holding/flight aviary.

Details of design, furnishing and use of each is provided below:-

Hospital cage

Design of a hospital cage for raptors is similar to those used for other birds. It is used for the initial holding of birds suffering from severe injury, shock or requiring force-feeding. This type of cage

would also be used for longer periods in cases such as when the bird has suffered leg damage and it must not be allowed to stand.

A hospital cage must provide a warm, dark, quiet environment and there should be minimal external interference. It should be of sufficient size to allow the housed bird to stand fully erect or lie fully extended across the cage. It should be constructed in such a way as to allow the rehabilitator to readily capture and remove the bird for examination or treatment.

Walls, roof and floor should be constructed of solid materials with adequate ventilation and heating. Provision should be made for the suspension of a cradle that may be required in some to hold a bird which must be immobilised and kept off its legs/feet. Deep litter should be placed on the floor, but avoid dusty materials such as sawdust, wood shavings, or straw. The hospital cage should be fitted with a thermometer and a shielded (to prevent burns) red bulb on a dimmer light switch to allow adjustment of heat output.

Intensive care aviary

A bird which requires continuing intensive care, but does not require holding in a hospital cage should be housed in a small fully enclosed aviary which allows easy access to the bird by the rehabilitator. The bird should feel secure and comfortable within it. The aviary should be constructed so that visual and auditory disturbances are limited and climactic extremes are minimised. The dimensions of a suitable intensive care aviary are length 3 metres, width 3 metres and height 3 metres.

The frame may be constructed from either timber or metal. Orientation should be such that the bird does not receive intense summer sun or be exposed to prevailing cold winds in winter. All walls should be solid, but in situations where the birds housed will not be exposed to outside disturbance, part of some walls may be of more open construction of either wire mesh or timber slats, in both cases with dense (70-80%) shade cloth on the inside. The roof may be solid (using fibro rather than metal or fibreglass to reduce heat transfer), in which case a small slightly opaque skylight should be fitted. Alternatively and preferably, at least part of the roof should be wire mesh or slatting, in either case with a dense shade cloth on the inside. The cage should not be allowed to become damp and mildewy. Care should be taken in design and construction to ensure that there are no projections that are likely to injure birds.

The floor can be grass or a mixture of small pebbles thickly spread over a concrete base. The pebbles should be hosed over at regular intervals and exposed to the sun for sterilisation purposes. If a grass floor is used then a small number of river-washed pebbles should be left in the cage. Raptors are known to ingest these and it is thought that they aid in food digestion.

A small number of varying diameter wooden perches should be placed in the cage. Swinging perches are useful as the free movement of the perch absorbs impact when birds land. All perches should be covered in artificial turf, rope, coconut-fibre matting, or some similar soft material that will not retain moisture. Limbs or trunks of paperbark trees have also been successfully used as perches and these do not require artificial coverings.

Perches should be placed so that a bird that cannot fly would be able to hop from one to the other. All raptors like to perch as high as possible in a cage. Water should be accessible to the bird but not for bathing purposes, as this can cause problems with bandaging etc.

Holding / flight aviary

The holding or flight aviary is used for raptors that have passed the intensive care stage or for raptors which do not have serious injuries etc.

The minimum dimensions for a diurnal (eagles, hawks, harriers, falcons etc) raptor holding aviary are length 6 metres or greater, width 4 metres or greater, height 4 metres or greater for the full

range of raptors. The smaller holding aviary for owls, described below, may be used for Australian Kestrel and Black-shouldered and Letter-winged Kites only.

For nocturnal raptors (owls), Australian Kestrel and Black-shouldered and Letter-winged Kites, the minimum dimensions of a holding aviary are length 4 metres or greater, width 3 metres or greater, height 3 metres or greater.

The construction and orientation of the aviary should be in line with requirements for intensive care aviaries with the following exceptions:-

- walls can be constructed from wooden slats or wire which, in either case, has shade cloth or a similar screening material fixed to the inside. One part of the aviary must be fully enclosed on three sides and the roof to provide protection from the elements and a place where the bird can retreat and be free from observation;
- a shallow bathing facility to be provided (garbage bin lids are ideal for small to medium sized birds);
- the aviary should allow the bird access to direct sunlight.

Exercise facilities

One of the highest priorities for successful raptor rehabilitation is to avoid imprinting. Hacking aside, it is impossible to free-fly a nestling raptor using falconry techniques without the bird first being imprinted and all foster-carers are aware that imprinting is a serious problem in the rehabilitation of any animal. For falconry techniques to be used, a more mature bird must be trained to overcome its natural fear of man. Many trained birds take a free flight opportunity, either of their own volition, or as a consequence of some other event (such as a fright), to regain their freedom. If this occurs they would more than likely be wearing leg jesses which may become entangled in vegetation and, of course, they have escaped at a time that the foster-carer has assessed them as requiring further rehabilitation. These arguments against falconry in raptor rehabilitation further support the prohibition on the use of free-flight falconry practices in raptor rehabilitation in this State.

Nevertheless, if it proves essential, the raptor foster-carer/rehabilitator must have skill or have access to skills to make exercise harnesses and flight lines to fly some birds for muscular development and attainment of fitness before release. But in most cases, with appropriate management, birds should obtain sufficient exercise in large holding aviaries to achieve high fitness levels before release. Designs for this type of equipment are available in the literature, and from experienced raptor rehabilitators.

Implementation

These minimum standards for raptor rehabilitation were first adopted by the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service for the licensing or authorisation of raptor rehabilitators from 1st July, 1991. The standards were reviewed by the Service in October, 1993 and in August 1995. DEC reviewed and endorsed the standards in June 2004.