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S.O.S. NEWS

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the news on the
S.O.S. Weekly Blog at
www.owl-help.org.uk

Suffolk Owl Sanctuary, Stonham Barns, Stonham Aspal, Suffolk IP14 6AT
Tel: 01449 711425 www.owl-help.org.uk

The Newsletter for the Friends of S.O.S.

Issue 14 Autumn - Winter 2009

General Manager Andy Hulme says **WELCOME** to the Suffolk Owl Sanctuary's Autumn/Winter Newsletter

Hello everyone!

Thank you for your continued support over the last few months; it's something we really appreciate and it helps to make our work here at the Sanctuary so much easier. Our biannual newsletter is one way we have of thanking all of our valued benefactors and those of you who support our endeavours by adopting an owl or making donations via The Owl Barn. We hope you enjoy this newsletter and remember, you can keep up-to-date with all our news, events and activities on our website at www.owl-help.org.uk

BEHIND THE SCENES

The work of the hospital is key to the ethos of the Suffolk Owl Sanctuary, as it is a vital part of being able to rehabilitate injured or orphaned raptors and return them to their natural habitat. The birds that come to us at the Sanctuary often need a great deal of TLC, as Conservation Officer Dean explains...

When raptors are brought to us at the hospital, the first thing we do is give them a thorough examination to look for any signs of injury or ill-health. Sometimes a bird of prey may have experienced very little in the way of injury, but for some reason is in a state of distress. In this instance, the most important thing to do is to assess whether or not the bird is dehydrated which, in a bird of prey, can be as devastating as starvation. If a bird is dehydrated, our priority then is to get some fluids back into it via a process called 'crop tubing'. This enables important fluids to be introduced directly into the stomach. It can look a little uncomfortable for the bird, but it's the most effective way of ensuring that these essential fluids, including glucose

and vitamins, are released as quickly as possible into the bird's system.

An injured bird could be suffering from anything from superficial cuts to serious bone breaks but as they are unable to tell us what's wrong we have to check carefully for any signs of external or internal bleeding. Basic first-aid is then applied and any breaks strapped up before we take the injured raptor to the vet.

Another vitally important thing that we need to look for is evidence of blindness. Obviously, blindness in a bird of prey would make it impossible for it to hunt and take care of itself in the wild, so impairing its chances of successful release.

Thankfully, there are many cases where we are able to rehabilitate the birds that come in to the Sanctuary and we are very grateful for all the help and support we receive from Stowe Vets, made possible by the generous contributions we receive from supporters like you.

A HARRIER HISTORY



One of our most recent & perhaps rarest hospital cases was a Marsh Harrier that was brought in to us from Fingringhoe in Essex. Apparently it was found by the side of the road and was in

a pretty poor state. Apart from the bird being very thin, the big toe on its right foot was about three times bigger than it should have been. On examination, we discovered a nasty, open, infected wound, which required immediate cleansing using a mild solution of Hibiscrub.

We then took the Harrier to the vet, who elected to do an x-ray just to ensure that there weren't any other serious complications. We were shocked to discover that there were two bits of shot in the bird's wing - a clear indication that it had been aimed at with a shotgun!

Thankfully, the Marsh Harrier is now recovering and, although it will be a fairly slow process, we are hopeful that it will be ready for release by the time you read this. You can catch up with the progress of the Marsh Harrier and read many other stories about the Sanctuary on our regular blog at www.owl-help.org.uk

REMARKABLE RAPTOR RESCUES ~ CHICKLETS AND TWIGLETS

Over the years we have experienced many unusual instances of 'raptor rescue' but this May saw a first, when we received a nest with three baby tawny owls still in it!

Apparently a local couple had decided



to cut down a tree, totally unaware that there was an occupied nest in it. Fortunately, they had the presence of mind to contact the 'Suffolk Wildlife

Rescue' group and a member of their team, Alex, immediately collected the birds and brought them straight over to us here at the Suffolk Owl Sanctuary.

Conservation Officer Dean took them under his wing (so to speak) by feeding them every four hours and taking them home to keep an eye on them overnight. They responded extremely well and, in a mere two weeks, had already doubled in size!

It's always exhilarating to be part of a success story, so the falconers were especially delighted in July when they were able to take the three Tawny chicks to a local farm, where they were placed in a hack box in a wooded area. The



In a flurry of feathers, the first of the three Tawnies flies free under Dean's watchful eye

three chicks remained in the hack box for seven days to give them the chance to acclimatise to their new surroundings and then the door was opened & they were released. While the youngsters were getting used to flying free, the falconers continued to feed them from the hack box for a week or so more until they were able to hunt and fend for themselves.



AVERTING A KESTREL KATASTROPHE

There has been a great deal of publicity about the fact that Barn Owls have lost much of their habitat through barns and farm buildings being either pulled down or converted, but they are obviously not the only species being

affected by these developments. Towards the end of June, three baby Kestrels were brought in to the Sanctuary from a farm in the region, because the barn they were nesting in was being demolished. Fortunately the farmer who owns the barn realised they were there, rescued them and brought them over to us.

The Kestrel babies took up residence with falconer Dean, where they were foster-reared by his captive bred female Kestrel 'Kaia'. It was hoped that Kaia would teach them all they needed to know, so that they didn't 'imprint' and become reliant on humans for food.

On Friday the 3rd July, the first of the Kestrels was put into a 'hack box' for a week, which was placed just inside a large open barn on a local farm. Then early in July, much to everyone's satisfaction, the first Kestrel was released, followed soon after by the other two. This system of hacking is an extremely important one, as it allows raptors to build up fitness and practice their flying skills before becoming totally self-sufficient. Again, the Kestrels were fed in the hack box, so that they had a guaranteed food source whilst learning how to hunt for themselves.

FASCINATING FACTS

In our regular weekly blog on the S.O.S website at www.owl-help.org.uk we have been looking at some of the most interesting and unusual facts about raptors and their behaviour. Here are some of my favourites.

Did you know, a Steppe Eagle has to undertake the longest migration of any Eagle species - all the way from Russia to Africa. Although it can weigh a stately 6 ½ pounds and has a wingspan of around 6 feet, a Steppe Eagle loves to devour around 2 to 2 ½ thousand termites for its favourite snack!

A curious feature of the Malaysian Brown Wood Owl is that from time to time it will choose to eat fish. Owls are dependent on keeping their feathers well oiled for cleanliness and protection from rain, yet fishing is an unusual pastime for this species to undertake.

Our smallest indigenous falcon, the Merlin is about the size of a starling. Merlins have played a significant role in falconry history going way back to Tudor times, when they were considered to be the 'Ladies' hawk. Even when Mary Queen of Scots was imprisoned, she was still allowed out to fly her Merlins, which she did over the hills of Northumberland, accompanied by Sir Ralph Saddler.



The Bateleur Eagle (above) gets its name from a french chap who noticed that the Bateleur had a rather strange method of slowing down when in flight. Bateleur is a french term which means 'tight-rope walker' and it was the strange rocking movement that this eagle uses to slow down, rocking from side to side like a tightrope walker with a pole, that prompted him to give it this name.

To find out more fascinating facts about various birds of prey, remember to follow the blog on our website.

SAMBA BABY, WHAT BIG EYES YOU'VE GOT...

Samba the European Eagle Owl began life at the beginning of April 2009 and, if owls can be said to be born with a silver spoon in their beaks, then Samba most certainly was. Although he's been retained to take on school and other out-show visits, right from the start he has been destined for a cosseted life with Office Manager and Relief Falconer Maz Robinson. Here's what Maz had to say about her amber-eyed-Samba...

Samba was one of a clutch of three European Eagle owls hatched by mum Rhea here at the Sanctuary. At the time of writing, he is now about 12 weeks old and apart from a bit of down on the top of his head is fully feathered with his



stunning adult plumage.

In preparation for his future role as an educational ambassador for SOS, Samba has been spending as much time

as possible with me so that he becomes thoroughly imprinted - at the moment I'm sure he thinks he's one of my kids and is certainly every bit as much trouble!

In the early days, he used to shuffle around the shop floor here at the Sanctuary, getting under my feet - that's when he wasn't sitting on the counter, greeting visitors to the centre who were naturally very intrigued by him. I have to say he was also extremely good at sorting out the stationery on my desk, albeit not necessarily in the manner to which I am accustomed

Two weeks ago, Samba was moved outdoors to a nice comfortable weathering during the day, as he rapidly became far too big to keep inside and with his wingspan of between four and five feet, was quite fond of sending all my papers flying!

Every night he comes home with me, where he lives in his aviary next to his friend 'Jemima', another European Eagle Owl who used to be a demonstration bird here at the sanctuary. She is now 24 years old and has earned her retirement. In captivity she could live to be around 60, so hopefully she's got a few more years to go yet.

Bringing Samba back and forth to work with me every day helps to continue with the imprinting process and it also gets him used to his travel box; this is a specially designed transport box with a perch, which is easy to put in the car. So when it's time to go travelling, we're confident that he will be cool, calm and collected on arrival at the schools and colleges we visit to give a spectacular account of himself in talks & displays!

PIRATES OF THE SKIES

This year, our colleague Andrew Farrow has organised various interactive educational activity days for young visitors to the Suffolk Owl Sanctuary. These have proved to be a great success with the schools concerned and the children have been able to learn about owls and other birds of prey in a setting where they can be really hands on. Andrew writes...

On Tuesday 9th June, 75 pupils from Murryfield Primary School visited the Centre to become 'Pirates of the Skies'.

The pupils had been studying birds of prey in school and a visit to the Centre and a close look at scavengers was just what was needed to help illustrate the work they had been doing. 'Pirates of the Skies' is a workshop we offer to schools along with 'Jurassic Raptors'

and 'All About Owls'. Based around scavenging birds of prey, 'Pirates...' looks at how some birds of prey like to hunt for their own food, where as others will steal food purely because they are too big and lazy to hunt their own!

S.O.S. is fortunate enough to have a great picture board which shows the meal of a Barn Owl being snatched away by a Kestrel while in flight. Comprising of a series of 9 pictures which all take place within roughly 60 seconds, it's perfect for demonstrating this type of scavenger and for helping the children to get an idea of what happens and how quickly birds of prey can steal food from each other.

During the workshop the children were asked to become 'pirates' and



design their own Jolly Roger flags. Ashley (my captain) and myself ran a competition to choose the best with prizes in 1st and 2nd place!

We also took the children on a guided tour, introducing them to a variety of birds of prey from 'Lily' our Little Owl to our biggest European Eagle Owl 'Rhea' and allowing them to get up close and ask questions. However I think the highlight of the visit for both pupils and their teachers was meeting this year's clutch of baby Snowy Owls; surprise at just how big they are at only 4 weeks old gets 'wow's' every time.

With the front row of seats reserved for our special visitors, we finished off the day with our ever-popular flying demonstrations and finally the group had the opportunity to explore the Centre's other attractions such as our woodland walk, sensory garden and maze.

STARS OF THE SHOW

As well as hosting a number of educational days at the Centre, we have also paid visits to schools within the Suffolk and Norfolk areas. Many of the children that we go out to see have never encountered a raptor up close and

it's a real buzz to see their looks of awe and excitement when we take birds of prey along with us on a visit.

The falconers have taken a variety of owls and other birds of prey in to schools, from Josh the Harris Hawk to Bali the Asian Brown Wood Owl, but our absolute top star has to be Auckland the Boobook Owl. Auckland has been with us on many a visit and is an absolutely consummate professional. He is very small at only about 14" long, with a wingspan of around 30" and the children are always amazed that he is actually fully grown. His stunning dark eye patches give him a rather startled, wide-eyed look, which is most appealing and he certainly knows how to use it to advantage!

Our mini star of the season had to be one of our Asian Brown Wood Owl chicks, who alternately slept and squeaked his way through three days of school visits. He was totally unfazed by the multitude of captivated faces peering down at him, accompanied by the usual chorus of admiring 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' and

stretched his wings, fluffed his feathers and staggered appealingly whilst trying to find his feet - just like a true pro!

EXCITING NEW SCHOOL DIARY FOR 2009-2010

This spring saw the launch of our exciting new **National Teacher Packs** for the three key stages of primary school children. We are delighted that they have been so well received and have provided a valuable resource for schools across the country. All three comprehensive curriculum-linked packs **can be downloaded from our website for free** and augment the implementation of our national "Saving Britain's Owls" initiative.



If you'd like a free copy of this informative booklet please call us on 01449 711425

From September 2009, the Sanctuary itself is also offering exclusive 'Education In Focus' themes, when visitors can be given a behind-the-scenes guided tour of the Sanctuary with a special talk on a particular monthly theme.

In September we will be looking at Conservation in Action and how our Nest Box scheme is encouraging wild owls back to the countryside. October will see us focusing on the Heritage of Falconry and discovering the fascinating role birds of prey played in mediaeval history. In November we take a look at Modern Falconry; a traditional ancient pastime which still survives in popularity today.

Next year our focus will start with the work of the raptor hospital; how we rehabilitate the wild birds that come in to us and release them back into their natural habitat. March and April will be an exciting couple of months, when the raptors begin to nest and breed and hopefully there will be baby birds for visiting kids to enthuse over. May is a time when the Sanctuary often has a large intake of 'orphaned' owls & we'll explore the issues surrounding these and the importance of being sure that a chick really is an orphan. All in all, an information packed diary for the next school year, so if you or anyone you know is looking for stimulating educational ideas with lots of cross curricular opportunities, please don't hesitate to contact us or visit the **Education Section on our website at www.owl-help.org.uk**

CHICKS, CHICKS, CHICKS

Andy Hulme, Falconer and General Manager of the Suffolk Owl Sanctuary gives us his report on this year's baby boom...

We have had a fantastic breeding season this year at the Sanctuary, with our raptors producing a staggering twenty-two Owls, Hawks and Falcons in total.

We have also had two pairs of birds

breed for the first time, which we are immensely pleased about. The Lanner Falcons produced four youngsters; three boys and a girl. The female, which we have named April has stayed with us here at the Sanctuary and has been trained for the flying demonstrations, joining her half brother Lock.

The second pair of birds to breed were Lily and Pippin our Little Owls, who produced two youngsters. We have kept one of the youngsters and have named him Mr Tumble. Mr Tumble is our first, second generation Little Owl, his mum Lily having been bred here at the Sanctuary five years ago & Grandma Snapdragon is also still with us. At the time of writing, Mr Tumble is now two months old and fully grown, although he still has some of his downy baby feathers. He is currently being handled and looked after by Andrew, and will be a part of our team of birds that come out with us on school visits.

Our other raptors have also been very busy this season and we are extremely pleased to announce the arrival of six Snowy Owl chicks, not to mention those produced by our Asian Brown Wood Owls, Boobook Owls, Southern Faced Scops Owls, Great Horned Owls and European Eagle Owls. Our Harris Hawks also bred successfully this season.

In addition to our new baby inhabitants, we also have three other arrivals at the Sanctuary. Fred is an American Kestrel and is perhaps one of the most colourful raptors in the world. Our native Kestrel weighs around seven ounces and positively dwarfs its American cousin, which is about the size of a song thrush and is an incredible weight of only three ounces.

Two other raptors we have been happy to give a home to are both wild, disabled birds, for which DEFRA have granted us sanctions; a Common Buzzard which came to us via the Cambridgeshire Police, which has a damaged wing and a Hobby again with a damaged wing, which was found on the Suffolk coast at Shotley.



AND FINALLY, THE AWARD GOES TO... YOU!

We are very pleased to announce that The Suffolk Owl Sanctuary has been awarded the 2009 Kingfisher Conservation Award for sponsoring Bird of Prey boxes in the Waveney Valley. Of course, this award is really one that can be shared by all of you as contributors & donators to our cause. Thank you - and wear the badge with pride!



PLEASE RENEW YOUR OWL ADOPTION

As we hope you can see from this newsletter, the work of S.O.S. continues with dedication & enthusiasm. But - if you can -PLEASE renew your owl adoption as your donation is vital to our future and the well being and care of our avian friends.

Please call

01449 711425

to renew over the 'phone or adopt-an-owl for a friend or you can do it online at www.owl-help.org.uk

Thank You!

