



THE OWL FOUNDATION NEWS

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We thought we saw a light at the end of a very long tunnel. For the most part, COVID restrictions had eased, however we are keeping some (masking when in presence of another) in place at The Owl Foundation for the time being. Better to err on the side of caution. We had two staff members contract COVID, thankfully both were fully vaccinated, and weren't overly ill. The close contact staff were sent home to quarantine, but remained negative. All in all, not too bad given the alternatives.

We had welcomed, with open arms (and masked faces), all our volunteers back. Again with a few restrictions (one at a time please), erring on the side of caution.

Here we were, thinking we could return to some sense of normalcy when a new scourge arrived: a highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) virus that has spread across North America since the winter. Avian influenza is a disease of birds caused by the influenza type A virus, the same virus species that causes the common flu in humans. Influenza type A is a very diverse kind of virus with many subtypes that infect birds, and other subtypes adapted to people. Within subtypes there are various strains, identified in part by the geographic area in which where they were first detected. The avian influenza virus causing big trouble for birds in North America now is a strain of Asian origin within subtype H5N1.

Strains differ widely in the severity of disease that they cause, even within one subtype. Strains like the current one, which cause severe illness and death in domestic poultry, are called highly pathogenic. Outbreaks of such strains in farms and backyard flocks of various domestic birds lead to control measures by government agencies, including the destruction of flocks to prevent spread of the disease. Hundreds of flocks have been infected in North America so far, affecting millions of domestic birds. This virus is also killing wild birds of many species, including raptors. HPAI viruses are chiefly a danger to birds. However mammals can be infected and may suffer serious illness and death. Infections in humans are rare. Poultry workers sometimes are infected. Transmission between people is very rare.

Our first encounter with HPAI was in March. A red-tailed hawk transferred to us from another rehabilitator had symptoms which suggested HPAI. It was euthanized immediately and sent for testing. This turned out to be the first detection of H5N1 HPAI virus in Ontario. Since then we have worked on improving our biosecurity to protect the many raptors already at the Foundation from the risk of being infected while here (see pages 4 & 5).

HPAI is highly contagious. If you keep birds, especially outside, measures to protect your birds may be needed, and you should avoid visiting other places with concentrations of domestic or wild birds. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency website has information about protecting flocks and pets from avian influenza.

With the HPAI concerns, we have been working hard to renest as many owlets as possible. This was also done in the past, always better to let their birth parents look after them. (When renesting is not possible, we call upon our amazing owl foster parents at The Owl Foundation.) When necessary, we have contacted arborists to help, and they have answered the call. See page 3 for more details.

On a much cheerier note, our resident Great Grey Owl pair, Fred and Fanny, have hatched one owlet this year. In addition, we may have some Snowy owlets this year. (see page 6) There is lots of hooting and Snowy Owl mating season is right around the corner. Fingers cross we'll be reporting on Snowy owlet's next newsletter.



Juvenile Snowy Owl

Lead Poisoning

In March 2022, Bluewater Raptor Centre for Raptor Rehabilitation admitted a female Bald Eagle from New Scotland, Ontario. The Bald Eagle was found in a farmer's field and was easily contained. Bluewater Raptor Centre requested to transfer the eagle to The Owl Foundation.

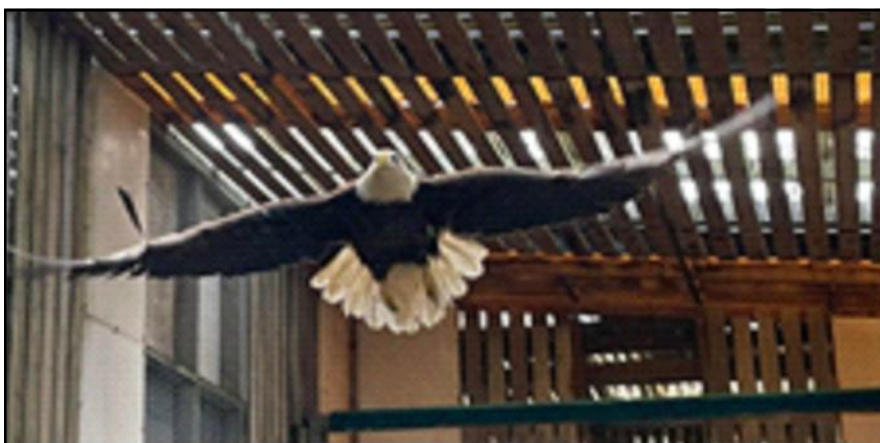
The Bald Eagle was examined by our rehabilitators, Annick and Brian, who found no obvious injuries but they highly suspected lead poisoning. The Bald Eagle had no appetite and appeared dull.

Bald Eagles in North America are becoming exposed to lead at an increasing rate. An eagle can be exposed to lead in various ways. Hunters often use lead bullets to hunt deer or other game animals. After a hunter has killed a deer and harvested the meat they want, they often leave the rest behind. Eagles will scavenge on a fresh kill and sometimes end up swallowing the lead that is in the unwanted meat.

If an eagle has swallowed the lead, it will start to leach into the blood stream. Most times the Eagle will cast a pellet which may contain pieces of the bullet but the blood will still be contaminated with lead. Lead toxicity symptoms include lethargy, difficulty breathing, no appetite, seizures and death.

Upon arrival, this Bald Eagle had blood drawn and sent to the lab to test for lead. These results take 3-4 business days. Tests confirmed that she did in fact have lead poisoning; her lead blood level was 0.28 micrograms per a millilitre. While this might not sound like very much, even a *very small* amount affects them, ideally the number would be zero.

While waiting on the results, we had immediately started a process called 'chelation therapy' which removes lead from blood using dimercaptosuccinic acid (DMSA) and sodium calcium edetate (CaEDTA). Over the next four weeks the Bald Eagle had to be picked up at least once a day to receive fluids, fed calorie (either liquid or quail meat) and dosed with medications. As the weeks progressed she began to get her strength back and administering daily treatment became more of a struggle.



Spreading her wings in a flight aviary



A most undignified (but safe for handlers) weigh-in

Around the 21st day of treatment she started eating completely on her own. We were overjoyed at this significant breakthrough in the case. We retested her blood and her lead level was 0.020 micrograms per a millilitre. That is a 90% decrease in her lead blood levels. We continued her rehabilitation in our long flight enclosure. She was successfully released back at the same farmer's field on April 22nd, 2022.

Successful Renestings

Spring time means baby owl season is upon us. We get a number of calls each week about baby owls that may appear to be orphaned or abandoned. It is important to call a licensed wildlife rehabilitation centre before touching or handling wildlife. The licensed rehabber can assess the owl's age by the feather development on its wing, even from pictures. This is an important first step as almost all baby owls will end up on the ground at some point in their development as they start to branch off and learn to fly.

Our first goal at The Owl Foundation is to renest and reunite all owlets found, but to do this successfully we have to confirm that there are still parents in the area. If it is a local site one of our staff will go out to the nest location for a full assessment. We can use our volunteer network of arborists who are willing to help climb trees and use drones to look at nest activity. We also will put a trail camera around the nest area to monitor at night for the parents.

There could be many reasons why a baby is out of nest. Great Horned Owls do not make nests, they take over old nests and some don't have the best choices. Possible reasons an owlet may be on the ground include: wind or storm damage pushing the baby out of the nest; being knocked out by another sibling if the nest is a little small; or simply an overzealous baby that leaves the nest too early.

As we go to press, we have assisted in several renests this year. In one case, a baby Great Horned Owl had fallen from a 70 foot nest located in Ancaster. Too young to fly back to the nest on its own, this baby needed our assistance so we made a trip to Ancaster (approx. 50km). The owlet was examined by our staff and had no injuries. The home owners informed us that the parents were still actively feeding the owlet on the ground and siblings were still in the nest so operation "reunite" went into effect. (Owl parents will feed their young if they can hear their reaping calls.) As we didn't have any volunteer arborists in the area (we do now!) we googled 'Ancaster Arborists'. Aberdeen Tree Services arborist, Steve Burgess, was delighted to help. He climbed the tree, placed a laundry basket that was filled with white pine needles on a large branch and then placed the owlet in the laundry basket. It was a great success! The home owners have been keeping us updated. The parents are still feeding the owlet in the laundry basket nest *and* the owlet(s) in the original nest.



A second renest took place in Fort Erie. The owlet was found on the ground. Fort Erie is also not too great a distance from The Owl Foundation so we were able to go and assess the situation. This time, it appeared the nest had completely fallen from the tree and there was only one owlet involved. The parents were not visible when we first visited so we placed the Great Horned owlet in a dog kennel overnight. This ensured the owlet would be safe from predators, would still make its reaping calls, and hopefully keep the parents close. The next morning, to our surprise and great pleasure, the home owners informed us there were pieces of food in the dog kennel! This meant the parents were still in the area and were feeding the young owlet through the kennel bars. The following day we used our local volunteer arborist, Matt Delazzer (assisted by his wife Kelly Lowes), to climb the tree and place the owl in an artificial nest. We continued to monitor the nest and confirmed that the parents were active and successfully raising the owlet.



Please call a wildlife rehabilitation centre before touching any wildlife, especially juveniles. Let us all strive to keep wildlife wild.

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Virus

Bird species vary in their susceptibility to avian influenza. Some species of waterfowl and shorebirds are thought to be the primary hosts of avian influenza viruses, in that they can be infected and can produce virus without suffering serious illness. Virus is shed in feces and in respiratory secretions. Avian influenza virus shed into the environment is capable of retaining for some time its ability to cause infection. It can remain viable in water and organic matter, on surfaces of many kinds, and in frozen matter. This persistence makes it more difficult to prevent spread. Virus on the ground can be picked up by animals, and by shoes and equipment, and in this way can be transported elsewhere.

Birds are infected by ingesting virus in contaminated food or water, or by close contact with infected birds or infected materials. The symptoms of highly pathogenic avian influenza vary and are not unique to this disease. They include depression, respiratory signs, diarrhea, hemorrhage, and abnormal behaviour such as not being able to stand. Sudden death may occur with or without symptoms. Lab tests are necessary to confirm avian influenza. In the context of an epidemic, a living bird suspected of having avian influenza based on symptoms should be euthanized, given the higher than usual probability of encountering avian influenza, the lack of any effective treatment for this disease, and the danger that any infected bird presents to other birds.

Raptors in the wild are infected mainly by eating infected birds. Raptors are among the species for which highly pathogenic avian influenza is deadly. The HPAI strain that has spread across North America in recent months has resulted in the death of many wild raptors. This is known mainly from testing for the virus in raptors found dead without other obvious cause of death, and from testing of euthanized cases.



Intake Screening Area

The spread of this virus is a significant threat to the Owl Foundation. Our priority is to protect the many raptors that were already at the Foundation before the virus was detected in Ontario. This includes many rehabilitation cases admitted earlier and resident birds. We have spent a couple of months on changes in our procedures, equipment and facilities to improve our biosecurity and to develop the capacity to quarantine incoming birds, which are the most likely source of potential infections here.

Where feasible, birds suspected of having avian influenza should be euthanized where they are found, due to the risks associated with transporting infected live birds. When finders call us, we ask about symptoms they can see. If the symptoms suggest avian influenza and the distance from us is not too far, a rehabilitator here may go out to examine the bird, and euthanize it if indicated. For distant cases we may recommend a rehabilitator closer to the location.

For raptors brought to us, we first put them in a temporary intake screening area we have set up in the tour centre, to keep them far from other birds. We examine the birds in the intake area and look for symptoms of avian influenza over at least 24 hours. Incoming birds suspected of having avian influenza based on their

Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza Virus cont.



Intensive Care Room, modified for HPAI

symptoms are euthanized, bagged and sent for testing. We have purchased avian influenza rapid test kits for virus subtype H5N1 in poultry. We hope that these tests may help in assessment, however their effectiveness for raptors and for the current strain is uncertain.

Raptors that are not euthanized are moved to one of our quarantine areas for 30 days. We are using our intensive care room and several rooms of the isolation building as quarantine areas. We renovated some units of the isolation building to replace decayed coroplast on the walls with plywood, and we taped vapour barrier film to walls and other parts of the intake and quarantine areas to improve the ability to clean these areas.

All handling of birds in the intake and quarantine areas is done with personal protective equipment. We are following cleaning and disposal procedures to prevent any virus that might be shed by new or quarantined birds from escaping to other areas via people, equipment, food, water and waste materials that have been in the intake or quarantine areas.

Virus could reach our property in other ways, including via transfer of virus to our property by people, vehicles, equipment and animals that have picked up virus elsewhere, or via feces of free-flying wild birds of any kind that may visit our property. We have implemented measures to protect raptors that were

already on our premises before the virus reached Ontario, and are mostly held in outdoor aviaries. At the entrances to aviaries, staff put on clean disposable shoe covers so that virus on the ground anywhere on the property is not transferred by shoes to the ground inside the aviaries. Equipment to be taken into aviaries is sanitized before setting it down.

Most of our aviaries have some areas of roof with coverings that are not solid. These areas allow rain and direct sunlight to get into the aviaries, which is beneficial for bird health, but they also allow feces of free-flying wild birds to fall into the aviaries or to be washed in from adjacent solid parts of roof. In some aviaries we have heavy cement pools that are exposed to rainfall, and sometimes areas of ground close to food boxes, ground on which food frequently falls, that are also exposed to rainfall. We have started to permanently cover areas of roof over big pools and over food areas with polycarbonate sheets to protect these areas from contamination by free-flying birds.



Isolation Building, built in 2002 for West Nile Virus

The Girl Next Door



This love story started with two Snowy Owls, a male named Yeti and a female named Sasquatch (affectionately called SassyQ). They were successful mates, having many owlets together over the years.

Tragically, their love story was cut short. In 2020 SassyQ contracted West Nile Virus and unfortunately did not survive. This left Yeti widowed and bearing the responsibility of raising their teenaged owlets alone.

In spring 2021 Yeti began 'flirting' with Astrilla, a female Snowy Owl in an adjoining aviary. In past mating seasons, Astrilla would look at Yeti as he made mating calls directed at SassyQ.

This spring, Yeti and Astrilla were placed in the same aviary. We are hopeful we will soon be able to share pictures of the arrival of their first clutch of owlets. Let's hope Yeti has found a new mate.



Volunteer Voice *By Petra Norris*

There are two things I am passionate about...nursing and wildlife. The first part of my life I spent as a pediatric nurse and then a forensic nurse, which allowed me to work in several places in Ontario and New Zealand. Now that I am retired, I am able to focus on my second passion, wildlife. As humans encroach more and more on wildlife habitat, we need to be responsible for the impact that we have. While I am an advocate for not taking away their homes in the first place, when I have no control over that, I focus on what I can do.

I was introduced to The Owl Foundation (TOF) when I was volunteering at the Toronto Wildlife Centre (TWC). There I was part of the squirrel nursery during the spring through to fall and then the rest of the year I was involved in the care of a variety of other animals, reptiles and birds. On occasion the TWC would send a raptor and care supplies to TOF and I volunteered to drive. On one of these occasions, I met Annick in the mouse house and she gave me the scoop on how TOF was run and opportunities for volunteers. I was moving from Toronto to St Catharines the following year and now had my next volunteer adventure all organized.

I started at TOF in 2019 as a Mouse House volunteer, caring for mice in a variety of stages of development and a small rat population. It wasn't long before the pandemic hit and the volunteers were on an extended vacation. Happily during this time there were still things I could do, like transporting owls to appointments, picking up injured owls and my personal favorite...releasing them back into the wild. There is nothing so incredible as opening an owl crate, having them look back at you with those stunning big round yellow or brown eyes (they see straight through to your soul) before flying off into the sunset.

When volunteers were allowed back into the mouse house, I was offered a position in the 'back room'. The backroom is where the front room mice will eventually end up. Last year I processed (counted, weighed and stored) almost 7000 frozen rats and 46,000 frozen mice. TOF can't raise all of the owl food through their breeding program so we get mice shipped in from Canadian Mouseman in Alberta and Reptile Feeders in Ontario. While working with "food" mice was not my intention...I enjoy being part of the process that keeps the owls recovering and healthy....and I have a lot less escapees from my bins in the back room than the folks do in the front!

Thanks to all the amazing staff that welcome and support the volunteers.



Meet McKeever

The Owl Foundation would like to introduce you to McKeever, a peregrine falcon named after our founder, Katherine McKeever.

McKeever was hatched in Windsor, Ontario in 2019 and this spring, at the top of the Sheraton tower in Hamilton, she paired up with a male named Judson. She and Judson hatched four chicks and so far she is doing a great job caring for them. The four chicks were recently banded, and we look forward to seeing what the future holds for them.

Congratulations to McKeever and Judson on their first family.

You can follow their progress on Hamilton Falconwatch Facebook page.

Photo credit: Hamilton Falconwatch



In Loving Memory

The Owl Foundation is deeply grateful for so many generous donations in 2021 given in memory of the treasured friends, relatives and animals listed below.

Kay/Larry McKeever	Gus	Gerrie Scholten	Barbara Simpson
Joan M. Rogers	Nugget	Greg Adamkowski	Neil Macdougall
Jinny Weekes	Tiny	Robin Whittamore	Arnold "Arnie" Chamberlain
Robert "Bob" Owen	Skuya	Alex Zawierucha	William (Bill) Bearrs
Steve Oneschuk	Zeke	Our Beloved Nicki	Katharine (Kay) Martyn
Dave McCamus	Charlie Hook	Patricia J. Collins	Lori-Anne Bastarache
Leonard Hodges	Terry Blok	Harold Holtam	Auntie Anne Carter
Robin Arzt	Susan Swift	John D. Wismer	Berneice (Bunny) & Bob Skelly
Ruth Morton	June Baker	Catherine Dewey	Thomas Joseph Zita
Cyril Bowles	Ted Austin	Valery Vollenweider	Olive & Gordon Ghent
Joan Baer	Paul Michalko	Doris Southwell	Margaret (Peg) Christie
Rita Gibb	Ruth Ranger	Rhondda Naylor	Rachel Leslie Ann Rosenberg
Ross Kelly	Sam Kingdon	Cosmo	Alfred Wierzimok
Zelda Yeoman	Roger Evans	Big Bird	Franklin and Mavis Folemsbee
Louis Rogers	Glen Rozycki	Bruce Duncan	Shirley "Tudy" MacIntosh
Lois Magee	Arlene Hatch	Shirley McBride	Catherine Gallagher
Micky Delanoe	William Alsop	Gail Gould	Peter "Craig" Campbell
Brian Douglas	Gnocci Bebe	Jeff Owen	Brighton Aysa Bodz
Ron Sigston	Lhasa de Sela	Harland Nicol	Audrey Fedyczko
Allison Jones	Will Murray	Linda Johnston	Michael (Mike) Sammons
Miles Jones	Evan Kitchen	Maryanne Beattie	Kenneth M. "Cuz" Clarke
Ron Quinsey	Angela Ruffles	Valerie Matthews	Daniel Grange Morgan
Spooky	Betty Henderson	Starry-Angel	Carol and Larry Toombs
Hop	Madeline Irvine	Jean Best	Joan Margaret Leader

Great Grey Owl

On April 15th, one of our volunteers, Adam H., was driving to Wye Marsh (40 min NW of Barrie) with his family for a fun filled Good Friday of the Easter weekend. When, much to his disbelief, on the side of the road was a Great Grey Owl being dive bombed by crows. Adam sprang into action calling The Owl Foundation before containing and driving the owl three hours directly to us. So much for his Wye Marsh hike.

The Owl Foundation seldom receives this species. Great Grey Owls are residents of the boreal forests, such as those of Northern Ontario. These owls move in response to prey abundance and sometimes wander south of the boreal forest when they can't find enough prey in their normal habitat. Perhaps that is what happened in this case.

On admission the Great Grey Owl was very emaciated and was immediately started on subcutaneous fluids. Unfortunately, the owl was so emaciated that he did not respond to treatment and passed away shortly after arrival. We suspect the organs started to shut down prior to the owl even arriving at The Owl Foundation.

The body was sent to the Canadian Wildlife Health Cooperative where they will do a full necropsy which might give us more information. The preliminary results show that he was negative for highly pathogenic avian influenza.

All of our resident Great Grey Owls have been with us for many years, and some have produced young here. Last year Fred and Fanny raised three young which were released this May near Cochrane in Northern Ontario.



Volunteers

We are always looking for volunteers, both indoor (mouse house) and outdoor for a wide variety of tasks. If you'd like more information please email owlmail@sympatico.ca



How did Adam even spot this Great Grey Owl?

Statistics

In 2021 The Owl Foundation admitted 233 birds which included 55 juveniles in need of our owl foster care program or support and hunting training opportunities.

We released 159 birds including birds admitted in prior years that required long-term convalescence and care.

Our volunteers logged more than 3,400 hours consisting of on-site work and owl deliveries.

THANK YOU!

