

Sharing Your Course With Raptors

Eagles, hawks, owls, and other birds of prey can be a vital part of wildlife on a golf course.

BY JEAN MACKAY

On February 16, 2004, Landscape Superintendent Doug Fuller was making a routine early morning tour of LaPlaya Golf Club (Naples, Florida). At the 13th green, he noticed a bald eagle swooping close to the treetops of a nearby slash pine stand. Suddenly, a juvenile great horned owl, not yet able to fly, fell to the ground. The young raptor scurried to safety in a nearby landscape bed and was not attacked again. But would the owlet survive on the ground? Did it sustain any injuries? What was Fuller to do?

Fuller's experience is not uncommon. Among the most charismatic wildlife species that frequently inhabit golf courses are hawks and owls. In my work with the Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program for Golf Courses, I've heard many bird stories, but none so numerous as the spectacular tales of red-tailed hawks swooping down to catch unwitting squirrels, osprey diving into ponds to nab fish, or stories of injured raptors.

Golf course maintenance staff need to know what to do *and what not to do* in these circumstances to ensure that birds of prey have a chance of survival. All raptors are protected by federal law, which prohibits disturbance to the birds themselves, as well as their eggs, nests, and even molted feathers. Injured birds must be handled with care, not only to prevent further harm to the bird, but also to protect the would-be helper against being attacked by the bird's powerful beak and strong talons.

Dan Dinelli, CGCS, knows raptors firsthand. Not only does he oversee North Shore Country Club in Illinois, but Dinelli is also a licensed falconer with a raptor breeding permit who raises captive birds of prey for educational programs and works with injured hawks and owls. Dinelli's red-tailed hawks have gone on to live at the likes of Disney's Wild Animal Park in Florida, Six Flags in Texas, Wings of America at the American Eagle Foundation in Tennessee, and the Minnesota Zoo.

"I have been infatuated with birds of prey for as long as I can remember," shares Dinelli. "With their proud stature, keen eyesight, and ability to rise high above, raptors impress me as powerful creatures, always in control." Growing up with his father and uncle serving as golf course superintendents, Dinelli got his start watching American kestrels, red-tailed hawks, and Cooper's hawks on the golf course. As a child, Dinelli recalls one early spring when his uncle found a young great horned owl while



Amy Heller of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida prepares to return the young great horned owl to its nest on LaPlaya Golf Club (Naples, Florida).

conducting course setup. Not sure what to do, the elder Dinelli brought it into the shop and raised it until it could fly.

"My uncle did what most people have an urge to do," says Dinelli. "Though meaning well, he probably should have taken a different course of action." The maiden flight of fledgling hawks, eagles, and owls rarely ends up with a pinpoint landing on a tree branch. In many cases, when a young bird falls out of a nest or fails at its first attempts at flight, its parents are nearby, ready to offer assistance.

"Looking back, the best approach might have been to set the fledgling up high on a branch and observe its well-being for the next few days. Often, a parent shows up and nature takes its course," explains Dinelli.

That's just what happened at LaPlaya Golf Club. Fuller and Assistant Golf Course Superintendent Mark Shoemake called local expert Joanna Fitzgerald at The Conservancy of Southwest Florida to get advice on the best course of

WHAT TO DO IF YOU FIND AN INJURED BIRD OF PREY:

- Don't move the bird unless it is in immediate danger.
- Contact a wildlife rehabilitator who works with raptors. In most states, the Department of Natural Resources maintains a list of licensed wildlife rehabilitators. A local nature center or Audubon Society may also be able to make a referral. Or use the Internet to find a rehabilitator near you. Conduct a search using the key words "wildlife rehabilitator." Many state and international references are available on the Web.
- Most wildlife rehabilitators volunteer their time to work with wildlife, *in addition* to a regular job. If they are not able to provide immediate assistance, they will tell you what to do until help arrives.

RED-TAILS: AT HOME ON THE GOLF COURSE

- The most common raptor on golf courses is the red-tailed hawk, whose habitat preferences overlap with its nightly counterpart, the great horned owl. Both hunt on the edges of fields and nest in woods.
- Red-tailed hawks and other raptors are at the top of the food chain, feeding on rodents, squirrels, rabbits, and, occasionally, snakes and birds. Manage tall grass areas or prairie cover with small brush piles or groupings of shrubs to offer habitat for their prey. Allow dead tree limbs to remain in areas posing no threat to people or buildings to serve as perching sites.
- Red-tailed hawks are common in their range throughout North and Central America. Standing 19" to 24", they are often seen perched on poles and dead tree limbs, which provide an open view of the surrounding terrain.
- Red-tailed hawks lay two to three eggs on average each year in a nest that is 15 to 70 feet high in the crotch of a large tree with a commanding view. The female incubates the eggs for 30 to 32 days and cares for the young for about 45 days before they are ready to fend for themselves.
- The first year of a raptor's life is so challenging that a mere 20 to 50 percent are estimated to make it to their second year. Adult birds have an average yearly mortality rate of 20%.

— F. Dan Dinelli, CGCS



Dan Dinelli, CGCS of Northshore Country Club in Illinois, holds his red-tailed hawk, Merly Girl. He has held his Master Class Falconer license since 1983 and a Captive Raptor Propagation Permit since 1988. Dinelli's adventures with raptors include helping the Chicago Peregrine Release Program to reestablish peregrine falcons in Chicago and finding active nests of the endangered Philippine eagle to assist the Philippine Eagle Foundation.

action for their fallen owl. Fitzgerald came to the course to inspect the young owl for injuries and, finding none, determined that the bird should be placed back in its nest. But the bird needed a lift. Steve Acquafresca, a Nations Rent representative, courteously donated the use of a 60-foot boom lift, and within 24 hours, the bird was home.

"During the course of that day we anxiously awaited the mother great horned owl to return, which did not happen," reported LaPlaya Superintendent Brian Beckner. "But the following day, we found the mother huddled next to the juvenile near the nest on an adjacent branch. Through our day-to-day routine, this was quite a rewarding experience."

WORKING WITH WILDLIFE REHABILITATORS

If a fledgling bird is really orphaned or injured, then intervention is needed. Superintendents should contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator who is trained to properly care for raptors. Raptor rehabilitators understand the many laws that apply to captive birds of prey, have proper housing and equipment, and know how to handle and treat them.

When injured raptors have been rehabilitated, they can be released back onto the golf course. In fact, golf courses are often ideal release sites, since golfing activity discourages wild predators during the day and maintenance schedules allow for supervision of released animals. "A golf course doesn't have to wait until it has an injured bird to contact a wildlife rehabilitator," advises North Shore's Dinelli. "Why not offer the course as a release site for orphaned or rehabilitated wildlife that can't be returned where they came from? We have released American kestrels and eastern screech owls at North Shore Country Club and used the ponds to release orphaned mallards and wood ducks, which returned in subsequent years to nest and raise their young."

Establishing a relationship with a wildlife rehabilitator is an excellent way to show a course's commitment to conservation. In addition to offering a potential home to needy wildlife, involvement with a rehabilitator provides golf course staff with access to expert advice and may result in golfers getting a close-up view of a hawk or owl. "Golfers take pride in knowing the land used to play the game can offer a great opportunity for wildlife," concludes Dinelli. "All in all, it's a win-win relationship for everyone."

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