

Raleigh's Story

By Deborah McMurtrie

A sliver of moonlight barely illuminated the November night sky. The nocturnal predator was perched on a branch in the forest. He was hungry. Two weeks of heavy rain had seriously curtailed his hunting, and the nights were getting colder. He needed food.



Scanning the forest floor for movement, his keen eyes spotted a tiny grey mouse. A greasy fast food bag, tossed carelessly from a car window, had attracted the mouse's attention. Ears twitching, the timid creature scurried out from under a rock.

The Barred Owl saw an opportunity. Focused on his prey, he readied his razor-sharp talons and silently leaped from the branch of the old hickory tree. The owl was so focused on catching his next meal that he saw nothing else. Just before he pounced on his prize, he was blinded by a blaze of harsh bright lights. Tires squealed as the driver slammed on the brakes.

The girl stopped the car and jumped out, horrified. The majestic bird appeared to be a lifeless heap of battered feathers sprawled in the road. His large eyes were closed. He was breathing, but he was clearly in shock.

The girl wrapped the trembling owl in a towel. She gently lifted him up, placed him in the car, and drove to her veterinarian's office. The x-rays revealed that the Barred Owl's left wing was broken. "Owls, like all birds, have bones that are hollow, like straws," the vet said. "The hollow bones are lightweight, which help them fly, but they are also quite fragile."

The owl was gently placed in a pet carrier and transported to the home of a raptor rehabilitator. A raptor rehabilitator is a person who works with injured birds of prey, such as hawks and owls. Their goal is to provide medical treatment until the bird can be released back into the wild.

Monteen, the raptor rehabilitator, transferred the owl to a small outdoor cage, called a mew. This regal raptor was not accustomed to being confined in a cage like a parrot. His left wing was stiff and sore, and he was unable to fully extend it.

Monteen brought him a dead mouse for supper. The flesh was not as fresh as his usual fare, but the owl was a carnivorous creature, and he was hungry. He learned to eat what was brought to him each day. Soon he began to stretch and fly from one end of the mew to the other.

One day the Barred Owl was taken to a long narrow flight cage to begin strength training. Day after day he practiced soaring and swooping. It was difficult, and he was not very good at it. However, this was a critical part of his treatment, leading up to the "Mouse Test."

The "Mouse Test" is used to determine whether or not a raptor is ready to be returned to the wild. The bird is placed at one end of an empty flight cage. A live mouse is released at the other end, with nowhere to hide. If the bird can catch it, the "Mouse Test" is repeated the next day, but this time the cage is filled with obstacles such as shrubbery and rocks. If the bird can quickly find and catch the live mouse, there is a good chance that he could survive in the wild. Raptors are predators. They must be able to fly with pinpoint accuracy in order to catch their prey.