Avian Haven avianhaven 2015

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Common Nighthawks would surely agree with proverb advice that “A closed mouth catches no flies.” Though often hidden behind tiny closed beaks, the massive open mouths of this species serve them well for capturing insects on the wing. For stories of birds that eat bugs as well as many other foods while in our care, read on!

Rehabilitation 2015 Overview

2015 was an unprecedented growth year. We passed our 2014 total in late August, with our 2,087 new admissions representing a 23% increase over last year’s total. With 47 patients held over from the 2014 calendar year, we cared for 2,134 birds in all during 2015. Our species count of 134 was similar to that of previous years, and there was no particular pattern to the admissions increase; we just seemed to see more of, well … almost everything! Other than raptors, our most common native species were Eastern Phoebe (141), American Robin (127), and Mourning Dove (116). Our 270 raptors included 99 owls (among them 80 Barred Owls), 88 hawks (including 55 Broad-winged Hawks), 33 eagles (32 Bald Eagles plus 1 Golden Eagle) and 32 falcons (most numerous among them were 21 American Kestrels).

Our 150 total water bird admissions included 104 ducks, more than half of them Mallards. Pelagic species included Northern Gannet, Dovekie, Black Guillemot, Atlantic Puffin, Manx Shearwater (see story on p. 2), and Leach’s Storm-Petrel. We also had 24 Common Loons and 3 Red-throated Loons. Non-native species comprised 157 Rock Pigeons, 43 House Sparrows, and 65 European Starlings.

Similar to past years, the most common causes of injuries were cat predation plus vehicle and window collisions. Lead ingestion continued to kill Common Loons and Bald Eagles; both of two loons and six of seven eagles admitted with lead poisoning died (one eagle is still pending). We again urge people who use lead ammunition to consider nontoxic alternatives; ballistics and other information can be found at huntingwithnonlead.org. Ways that homeowners can make their windows more bird-friendly can be found at the American Bird Conservancy’s Bird-Smart Glass program, birdsmartglass.org. And for folks who allow their cats to go outdoors, the cat bib featured at catgoods.com is an effective way to reduce bird fatalities.

Given that we typically raise 500 or more nestling songbirds each summer, we are rarely completely mistaken in species identity. But our first songbird nesting of 2015 had us fooled! Admitted on May 12, the young bird was clearly a finch of some kind; we assumed it was a House Finch, given that this species is typically the earliest of the finches to breed. As the common name suggests, House Finches often nest close to human dwellings – on porches, for example. In retrospect, we should have paid more attention to the rescuer’s report of having found the bird in the woods. Less than two weeks later, when the bird’s feathers had matured to a point of showing a yellow wash on the breast and flight feathers, we had an “Oops” moment and recognized the bird as a Pine Siskin. Typically considered a winter irruptive in our area, the Pine Siskin does breed in Northern New England, as well as in Ontario, Quebec, Labrador, and Newfoundland. Released on June 10, this individual was our first orphan of the species, but probably not our last!

One of our more unusual groups of songbirds came through our door on June 8 in a nest in a tool box that had been brought from Massachusetts the previous day but not opened until that morning, when the nest was discovered. In it were six young House Wrens, and we were too astonished by their unusual nest cavity to remember to take what would have been a fascinating photo! Their development was largely unremarkable; all six were released on June 26.
We saw a few more cases of avian pox than typical of past years. Avian Pox is a viral disease that can manifest as wart-like lesions on the skin. It can be spread by direct contact, but mosquitoes are the primary vectors, with pox outbreaks more common in late summer and fall, when mosquitoes are plentiful. It is fairly species-specific; the affected birds we see every year are American Crows and Mourning Doves; in 2015 we also saw pox on Canada Geese and a Bald Eagle.

In addition to winged creatures, we treated 31 reptiles, most of them car-hit Eastern Painted and Snapping Turtles. From gravid females admitted DOA, we harvested and incubated eggs; and from their eggs, 52 turtles hatched and were released.

### Helpers at the Nest

Our awesome team of patient caregivers includes both employees and volunteers, some year-round, some seasonal. They bring diverse skills and experiences together in a cohesive, harmonious whole that is truly greater than the sum of its parts. Glori Berry (Assistant Infirmary Manager) and Terry Heitz (Physical Plant Manager) continued in their positions of last year; they have been joined by Kim Chavez, a 2014 intern who returned as seasonal staff for 2015, only to quickly become so indispensable that she stayed on as Assistant General Manager. Abby Everleth and Kara Chester were additional employees for the summer season; Alexandra Jimenez and Krystal Poulin were interns from the University of Maine. Other occasional, nestling-season, or year-round volunteers were Jane Brackett, Nancy Carhart, Kyla Clark, Amy Dillon, Jennifer Dudley, Laura Graham, Linda Harrell, Laurin Huse (visiting from Cascades Raptor Center in OR), Laura Lecker, Marilyn McClelland, Connie Moore, Melissa Smith, Jerry Stefanek, Susan Stone, Janet Wieseley, and Tanna Witkin. Laura Lecker became our Outreach Coordinator in 2015; she gave seven programs in various parts of the state.

For e-mail advice on our most challenging cases, we thank wildlife veterinarians Erica Miller, Mark Pokras, and Flo Tseng. Locally, “our” veterinarian, Judy Herman, provided invaluable surgical repairs as well as homeopathic consultations. We also thank ophthalmologist Steve Witkin for expert examinations of birds with eye damage.

One of our greatest assets is a network of volunteer transporters who help injured birds get here safely and quickly from many parts of the state, and who also may bring recovered birds back to established territories for release. Our admission records note the driver(s) exploring eBird for posts of winter Manx Shearwaters anywhere in the Northeast, and was excited to find regular sightings around Cape Cod in December–February of past years. She contacted our friend Lynn Miller at Cape Wildlife Center in Barnstable; yes, Lynn could participate in a release plan if one could be formulated. Transporter Don agreed to drive the bird to Cape Cod.

On December 7, Diane found an eBird report of 28 Manx Shearwaters off Cape Cod’s Race Point Beach just two days earlier. The person reporting the birds, Peter Flood, was an officer of the Cape Cod Bird Club, and his e-mail address was on the club website. Diane contacted him immediately. Peter was happy to help, but his availability was limited to weekends, and Don was not free the coming weekend. But we did not want to lose the opportunity; weather was unseasonably warm, with a perfect-looking day forecast for Saturday the 12th. According to Peter, the best time for release was during the early morning feeding activity. A quickly conceived plan was for Don to drive the bird to Cape Wildlife Center the previous afternoon. Our friend Lynn would house the bird overnight; Peter would pick her up early the next morning, and then drive her to Race Point Beach for release. Everything went as planned! The bird had a little trouble clearing the surf, but once into calmer waters, swam and flew toward a group of pelagic birds that included Great Shearwaters and Razorbills. Peter saw no Manx at that moment, but had often seen them feeding with the other species present. We called it good, and thought it even better when Peter e-mailed the next day to report having counted 145 Manx Shearwaters near the release location.
The first couple of months of 2015 were tough ones for ducks. Cold temperatures limited the amount of open water even in some coastal areas. We began admitting starving Mallards in January; the sea ducks came in a little bit later, many of them found thin and debilitated in snowbanks. Colleagues at rehab centers all along the northeast coastal corridor had record-breaking duck admissions in February, as did we.

Typical among these cases was an immature male Greater Scaup admitted February 18 from Portland. He’d been seen on the ground by a passerby the previous evening; she called us when the bird was in the same location the next morning. We learned later that another person who had seen the bird assumed it was dead and frozen; he had just walked on by. One of our volunteers attempted a capture, but that effort failed when the duck ran into a snow-filled gully. Meanwhile another Portland-area volunteer, Diane Davison, happened on the scene, saw the duck, and managed to secure him. The property owner made the first leg of a transportation relay that included volunteers Kathy Stager and Mandy Madsen. Like most of the other February ducks, this individual had no injuries but was very thin and had a heavy parasite load. He was already on the road to recovery when a second Greater Scaup, this one an immature female, walked up to the door of a home in St. George. The property owner secured the bird, and began a transportation relay that continued with volunteers Selkie O’Mira and Marilyn McClelland. Like the first scaup, this individual was thin and parasitized, but not injured. The two ducks were released at Portland’s Eastern Promenade on March 7.
2015 did not begin well for Bald Eagles. Our first four eagles (January through March) all had lead poisoning, and all died, as did a 5th admitted in May. As is typical over the course of a year, we saw no further instances of lead toxicosis until the fall hunting season, when two others were admitted. The first of these did not survive, but the second bird, admitted a couple weeks later in the fall, is still alive. Her case was unusual for several reasons, one of which was her rescue in a twosome from Oxford, ME by Wdn. Tony Gray. Tony had responded to a report of two mature eagles on the ground together. They did not seem to be interacting, much less fighting. By the time Tony arrived at the scene, it was dark, and he found them tangled in raspberry bushes. As he approached, only one tried to fly, but could not get far, and was captured with little difficulty. When the birds arrived here the next morning, November 16, both were bright and alert with seemingly minor injuries; one had an old wound on one leg; the other had a fresh wound on one wrist. From their size, we judged them both female. As a matter of course, we checked blood from both birds for lead; we were astonished when the level for the one with the wing wound was close to zero, while the other’s was beyond the upper limit of our screening instrument. We started that bird on a chelating agent immediately, sent a blood sample to a diagnostic laboratory, and waited for things to worsen. But to our surprise, she continued to appear healthy and was soon fractious in her indoor hospital cage. As soon as the first round of chelation was finished, we moved her outdoors. Two days later, her blood level had dropped significantly, though another round of chelation would be needed.

That same day, we received the lab results; on admission day, her blood lead level had been beyond what is sometimes considered an upper limit for recovery. Accounts of lead exposures in eagles suggest that a massive acute exposure can raise the blood level rapidly and dramatically, but if the bird manages to regurgitate the lead soon after ingestion, that level can drop equally quickly – possibly before any critical body systems are damaged. That possibility is our hope for this individual. As of the close of the calendar year, both Oxford birds remain in care; the one with the wrist injury regained strong flight, and was released in time for Spring courting season.

As is usually the case, we admitted a number of juvenile eagles that had run into difficulties upon fledging. One of the more dramatic rescues involved a younger discovered August 13 on National Audubon’s Hog Island. After the initial report of an eagle in trouble, Friends of Hog Island’s Juanita Roushdy called us, then set off with another staff member on foot while a third searched by kayak. Volunteer transporter Carol Jones arrived at the mainland dock at about the time the bird was located; while two staff members stayed with the bird, Juanita went back to the mainland for Carol, returning full throttle to the island. They landed the boat on the beach; intent on making their way to the eagle’s location, they did not notice how rapidly the tide was ebbing. The retrieval of the bird was uneventful, as she was too weak to struggle. The four women returned to the boat and secured the eagle safely. The problem was then how to get the beached boat back into the water. The four women pushed, pulled, stretched, grunted; the boat did not move, but the determined rescuers persevered. A sidewinder approach was finally successful; with the boat afloat, the four wet and muddy women (by their own description, “no spring chickens”) high-fived. After a high-speed trip to the mainland, the bird was on her way here by car with Carol.

On arrival, the bird was emaciated, with basic bloodwork indicating a more advanced state of debilitation and anemia than we had ever seen on a living bird. Our recovery protocol included a Traditional Chinese Medicine formulation for blood-building and a gradual ramp-up from fluids, to high-calorie simple liquids, to more solid tubed foods, to whole prey. Her recuperation was much less remarkable than her rescue; over the next six weeks, her weight doubled and her flight became flawless. She was released in early October along the lower Kennebec River, with Juanita and Carol on hand to see her off. That’s Juanita grinning in the background.
We treated 24 Common Loons in 2015, including one youngster that was rescued from a highway between two ponds in Vermont. Attempts were made to return the bird to both of the nearby ponds, but neither attempt went well. After being attacked by an adult loon at the second pond, the chick was retrieved, and began a journey that led him to us on August 22. We released him late in September.

One of the adult birds was admitted on June 17 after a rescue from Moosehead Lake by Warden Kim Bates. Volunteer Rob Jones met Kim partway here and brought the loon in. The loon’s body was hugely swollen from what we assumed to be ruptured air sacs. Accessory structures to the lungs, the air sacs of birds may rupture from punctures or from traumatic impact. Air then leaks out into the body cavity, inflating the skin like a balloon. Small, localized ruptures may produce a small air bubble under the skin; however, this bird had more global leaks that resulted in him looking like a beach ball and being too buoyant to dive. On a few occasions, we were able to relieve some pressure temporarily by inserting a hypodermic needle under the skin and milking air out through the needle’s hub, but each time, the “balloon” re-inflated, so further procedures seemed pointless. The loon was eating well and doing fine except for being unable to dive; we decided to wait and see. Waiting ended on June 25: presumably due to the ruptures healing, the inflation was significantly diminished. Within another week, the loon was diving and restless.

On July 1, we had a phone call from the person who had alerted the local warden service to the bird’s plight. She said there was currently a single bird in Cowen’s Cove, where our loon had been found, calling but getting no reply. Our bird was ready to release, but we were up against a holiday and a shortage of wardens with time to travel. Fortunately, however, Driver Don was available, so on July 3, he took the bird to Rockwood and met Wdn. Will Shuman; they traveled by boat to Cowen’s Cove. Once at the release site, they opened the transport box and tipped it toward the water, expecting the bird to remain on the surface and swim away. But the bird dove straight from the box, appearing to sink as if it had been a bowling ball dropped in the water. Unfamiliar with loon behavior, the people on the boat wondered if something had gone horribly wrong. They were greatly relieved when the loon popped up out of the water about 30 feet from the boat. We had to apologize to Don for not having warned him about what a loon might do once reunited with open water!

The Moosehead bird was not yet out the door on July 3 when another adult loon arrived with volunteer Melanie Bridges and her daughter Jamie. He had been found the previous night on Rt. 202 in Manchester near the north end of Cobbosseecontee Lake. This bird was another “balloon loon”! It took about two weeks for the presumed air sac ruptures to heal; on July 21, the bird was able to dive and catch live fish underwater. As soon as the ability to dive was regained, the loon became extremely restless; he needed to be released soon. Due to work schedules, his rescuers were not able to attend a release, but instead, our biologist friends Shearon and Kyle Murphy took him back to home territory for release.

The Roost

The modular habitat shown as a drawing on last year’s back page became a reality by the end of 2015, as shown on the current back page! Designed and built primarily by Terry Heitz, many others assisted with the project. We thank especially Pittston-based builder Joe Caputo and his crew, whose help with exterior sheathing and roofing allowed the completion of these phases in record time. Other help was provided by Dave Bailey, Thomas Guillebeau, Tug Kellough, and the Unity College Wildlife Club. The tall front wall of the structure inspired its name – The Heights (which coincidentally sounds like Terry’s last name!). Its first occupant was not the envisioned small raptor, but a Golden Eagle transferred here from New Hampshire in mid-December. Funding for the new habitat was provided by the Island Foundation and the Adelard A. Roy & Valeda Lea Roy Foundation.

The need for input from a soils engineer led us to postpone a plan for a second pond that could become an “enriched” version of the Pool Hall for summer use. That project is back on the list for 2016, when we will also need some major repairs and renovation to the large raptor compound.

In the virtual realm, avianhaven.org was spruced up in late fall by its long-time webmaster, James Skowbo. The “Summer 2015 Guests” presentation on our website’s Slide Shows page features the Common Nighthawks shown on the cover and some of the Northern Gannets mentioned in the Rehabilitation 2015 Overview section. Our extremely popular Facebook Page, managed by Selkie O’Mira, continued to provide not only reports of our current admissions but also information on natural history and ways to prevent common sources of difficulties for wild birds. Anyone, not just Facebook members, can view it by clicking the Facebook icon on our home page.
Our 2015 total of 18 Red-tailed Hawks was only a bit higher than in the past, but what was strikingly different was the timing. In 2013 and 2014, we had virtually no winter admissions of this species; however, we had 8 in January through March of 2015, all but one of them adult birds. Some were found on the ground with little to suggest a cause for their injuries; others were hit by cars or had been preying on domestic chickens. (One bird had to be euthanized after being bludgeoned by the enraged poultry owner.) An exceptionally heroic rescue was made from I-295 near Portland’s Washington Avenue: our volunteer Rob O’Connell arrived on the scene to find two State Police cruisers with flashers on, shielding the bird from traffic.

Among these hawks, two remain particularly memorable. One rescued on February 16 had flown into a window in Rockland, reportedly in pursuit of another bird. The hawk was missing the lateral talon on both feet; she had a large sore on the right footpad and the two remaining front toes were swollen as a result of old fractures. A short time later, a sore opened up on the hallux of the left foot. Management for both feet continued into May, but by the middle of the month, they had healed.

Well before that time, she was joined by an adult male rescued on March 6 from Westbrook. This individual had injuries to both wrists: the “hand” of the right wing had multiple fractures, and the other had an open laceration. Concern about compromised circulation was relieved on March 16, when our ultrasonic Doppler indicated good blood flow to the wingtips. But this bird also had foot problems! The middle toe of one foot was already missing its tip and talon, and frostbite signs appeared on the tip of the middle toe of the other foot around the middle of March. Within another week, the frostbitten toe was starting to die back, and what was left of the middle toe on the other foot had begun to swell. By then, both feet had to be bandaged. The talon on the frostbitten toe sloughed early in April, but the toe tip had healed nicely by the end of the month. By mid May, both feet looked good!

These two hawks had been housed together for several weeks and seemed to have formed a pair bond, so a decision was made to release them together in unclaimed territory. They were set free on May 17.

As we took a call late in the day of July 12 about a crow found on the ground near an Augusta exit of I-95. It was close to closing time, so arrangements were made for overnight care with local volunteer Linda Harrell. She saw no obvious injuries, but given the location, a vehicle encounter was presumed. On arrival here the next morning, we noted only a generalized weakness attributable to a heavy parasite load. Once the parasites were treated, recovery seemed to progress smoothly, and the bird was moved to an outdoor habitat with other juvenile crows. By the end of July, things appeared to be fine; most of the crows had been released. This bird was one of four youngsters remaining in care.

About a week into August, the bird seemed to be favoring one leg, and an exam revealed an abscess on that leg plus a smaller one on the other leg. Given the time of year, we strongly suspected avian pox, and began treating the lesions aggressively. For some period of time, we kept this bird indoors to reduce the risk of the infection spreading to the other crows still in care, though we had no way of knowing whether the disease had originated from a bird already contaminated on admission, or whether mosquitoes had carried the infection into the flight cage from neighborhood wild birds.

As August progressed, pox lesions appeared on the other three crows, and despite sequestering and treatment, we were not able to control the proliferation of lesions in two of them. But by early September, the leg sores on the Augusta crow had healed, and we felt comfortable moving him back outdoors. Within another two weeks, he was zooming around the flight cage and landing without showing any leg weakness. There was no reappearance of pox lesions anywhere on his body. Kim began looking for the likely location of his family, and found typical crow habitat in Augusta very close to his recovery location. When she took him there for release on September 22, he flew straight over to two crows prowling around a yard.

While our crow pox drama was playing out, on August 7, another fledgling crow was observed tangled in fishing line that tethered a leg to a tree branch near the top of a tall hemlock. He was trying unsuccessfully to break free by flying; each episode would leave him hanging by the leg, then regaining footing on the branch. Rescue was a job for Brent Bibles, an experienced climber and raptor biologist currently teaching at Unity College. Marc and Laurin watched from the ground as Brent climbed toward the crow’s location. The tree was too thin to climb close enough to free the bird, so instead, Brent cut the tree tip, then used a rope to lower it, with the crow still entangled, toward the ground. But part way down, the bird freed himself from the branch and flew to the ground. He seemed dazed when he landed, and although he attempted escape, Marc and Laurin managed to capture him and remove the fishing line from his feet. Fortunately, the bird was able to grip with his toes and the line did not seem tight enough to have restricted circulation. After just a few days of recovery he was using his feet normally. On the 10th, we moved him to an outside flight cage, where he flew well, landing easily and gracefully. He was released back at the recovery location on August 14.
Nest Eggs

Given the increase in case load, our operating expenses understandably increased as well in 2015. Fortunately we received sufficient income to meet those costs, both from unrestricted foundation grants and private donations. When the large number of owls in care necessitated the purchase of feeder mice for the first time in our history, our Facebook Fans rallied with donations to offset the increase to our food budget. For grant support, we are particularly grateful to the Baker Street Trust, the Bank of America Charitable Gift Fund (Ding Fund), the Conger Family Foundation, the Susan & George Craig Family Foundation, the Maine Community Foundation (Dakota Fund, Sirius Fund, and an anonymous component fund), the Martha Morse Foundation, the Spellissy Foundation, the Stifler Family Foundation, and the Vanderbilt Family Foundation. Other sources of income included investment earnings, homorariums, etc. The left side of the chart below shows the proportions of revenue in each category.

Operating expenses are typically categorized as program services (costs that directly support the organization’s mission, such as, in our case, veterinary and food supplies, payroll, small equipment, etc.); management and general (insurance, business supplies, etc.); and fund-raising (production of this report, pamphlets, etc.). The right side of the chart shows the proportion of spending in each category.

As noted elsewhere in this report, some grants received in 2015 funded the acquisition of long-term assets, such as our new flight cage. Finally, some foundation and private contributions were directed toward our endowment, building our support base to ensure the availability of salaries for personnel to replace Marc and Diane when they retire.

In Closing . . .

Some of the birds whose stories appear in this report were individuals without serious injuries; they recovered from their difficulties with little intervention other than supportive care. But many others were admitted with severe fractures or grievous wounds, and despite 2015’s busy case load, we found time to invest in patients who seemed at the outset to have little chance of recovery. Of course, we could not save them all, but a memorable success story was that of a nestling Great Horned Owl whose entire left thigh was an open wound seething with maggots when we first met him. It took nearly two months of treatment to heal the area; throughout that time period, the youngster was comforted by the company of an injured adult Great Horned who later joined our avian staff as a foster parent. After the mended youngster finished growing up, he was released back on his natal territory in September, an event memorialized by board member Mary Bird, who had traveled with the owl in both directions. Stories like his inspire and remind us that, even in the bleakest of circumstances, there is always hope.

Until next year—

Diane & Marc
Diane Winn and Marc Payne, Co-Directors

All photography is by Glori Berry unless otherwise credited.

AVIAN HAVEN is a nonprofit wild bird rehabilitation center dedicated to the return of injured and orphaned birds of all species to their natural roles in the wild.

Support for Avian Haven comes almost entirely from foundation grants and donations made by members of the public. Your tax-deductible gifts ensure the success of our mission. Please help us continue to provide top-quality care for Maine’s wild birds by making an annual or monthly contribution.

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