



The Hungry Owl Project Newsletter
www.hungryowl.org

Volume 4 Issue 1
 Spring 2007

Bringing up Junior	1
Evening with Owls	3
Wanted: Techie Owl Lover	3
Is Your Box Occupied?	3
Exciting News	4

Bringing up Junior

Raising a young Turkey Vulture for life in the wild

by Alex Godbe

Turkey Vultures, Nature's black-clad undertakers, are much maligned. A cousin of the impressive California Condor, they are in fact Nature's clean-up crew. The high acidity in their stomachs enables them to consume diseased and rotting flesh without ill-effect and so aid in preventing the spread of disease.

They are intelligent, social creatures who are devoted parents and partners. They can be moody and at times aggressive, but they can also be full of playful mischief. They are fascinating, often comical characters. Up close their eyes express a certain sensitive vulnerability.

Having had past experience with Turkey Vultures, I was notified last July of a one-week-old baby TV found abandoned on a trail at the bottom of a slope somewhere in Sonoma County. It had been taken to the nearest Wildlife Center. Had the rescuers known that TV's nest on the ground in the hollows of trees, caves, rock crevices and other dark, den-like places, they might have climbed the slope and found the nest and returned the unfortunate orphan to where he most certainly belonged. Having looked up into the trees instead and not finding a nest the rescuers did what they thought best.

Calls were sent out to nearby rehab centers to find a place with an adult TV to act as a foster parent. TV's are very easily imprinted on humans and just like the first attempts to release captive-bred California Condors back to the wild, it was difficult to achieve without these birds seeing humans as a source of food. It is very important that these birds are raised with their own species.

WildCare was chosen as the place to send our little helpless waif, because of our educational and infamous adult TV, Vladimir. Vladimir, being an imprinted bird himself and therefore not releaseable, was maybe not the best role model.

Along with Turkey Vulture expert Rodger Wallace from the World Bird Sanctuary in St Louis and WildCare staff, we came up with a plan to raise "Junior" with the least possible human contact. I was warned that Vladimir might

possibly attack the youngster and indeed he did show signs of aggression. So, being cautious, we put the chick into a cage within an aviary with Vladimir. The aviary was in a quiet location off site. We covered the sides with tarps to prevent any accidental sights of humans.

Since TVs regurgitate food for their young, we prepared a thick "soup" of finely chopped rat with just a sprinkling of a calcium and vitamin supplement 3-4 times a

Continued on page 2



Our young Turkey Vulture being weighed
 Photo by Alex Godbe

Bringing up Junior

Continued from page 1

day to begin with.

We entered the aviary covered from head to toe in large towels to disguise our form. The food was served in a bowl and was rapidly “vacuumed” up with slurps and gulps. The only time Junior saw us briefly was when he was weighed. I took advantage of these times to take a few photographs. Ugly and cute were often in the same sentence when describing this tiny prehistoric looking creature. A black and naked wrinkled head, with the softest fuzz, arose out of a ball of cream-colored fluff. Dark blue eyes took on the innocence and curiosity of being a new thing to this world.

Junior grew fast and it was no time before he outgrew his cage. He was transferred into an adjacent aviary with constant full view of his foster dad, who began to be increasingly more interested in his companion. The “soup” became a stew and fed less often until whole food was offered twice a day. As much as possible we fed him natural food he might find in the wild...the occasional squirrel hit by a car for instance. Soon beautiful black iridescent feathers replaced the fluff. His head will remain black for another year before turning slowly red until he reaches maturity at two years. The fuzz covering his head started to disappear as he metamorphosed into a recognizable Turkey Vulture. At 6 weeks old he was beginning to flap his wings furiously just as he would in the wild, preparing and strengthening them for flight.

The next phase of Junior’s upbringing was to take him to WildCare’s 150’ long flight aviary. Along with another adult TV recovering from a wing injury, he could practice flying and perhaps learn some social skills from the adult, so necessary for his survival in the wild. A juvenile TV will stay as much as 6 months or more with its parents and then continues to rely on other communal members of the roost in order to find food and safe roosting sites. Junior desperately needed to behave like a wild bird to be accepted – alone, his odds of surviving were not good.

I called the Humane Society to ask if they could regularly deliver fresh deer carcasses over the next few months. They kindly agreed. This would not only provide a natural food source, but would also attract other wild TVs to the area. Once it was clear that Junior was strong and could fly well, it was time for his release. He would be released on site where food would be available and he could integrate with the wild birds coming to the carcasses to eat.

The day came and my heart was full of trepidation. It is hard not to be attached however hard you try not to be. So much could go wrong. I was also very concerned about my father back in England who had recently been hospitalized after some months of declining health. I took Junior from the flight aviary and placed him on a balcony where I would stay with him until he was ready to leave. I think a bird taking flight to freedom for the first time touches us all. I think it a reflection of our own desire to be free. In my mind I talked with my father and told him to fly free on the wings of this bird. The next morning I got the call Father had died the day

before.

The 4th of December had been a windy day and our young bird had been fearful. The wind taunted him with every gust. He was clearly not ready to go. I took him back to the flight aviary and tried again the following days. It took several days before he finally launched himself into the air. On unsteady wings he made a crash landing into a nearby tree. Hanging on for dear life, he wore a decidedly surprised expression on his face – but he made it!

Junior was seen on a regular basis for several weeks, often at a deer carcass and interacting with wild TVs. When the storms came I lay awake and worried, but he made it through, probably following the adults to find shelter. I was



Junior given his first taste of open space

Rat Poison Kills

Sharing your home with rats can be frightening and we s
ing rat poison jeopardizes the safety of our children, our
data, more than 15,000 children under the age of six ac
to find an

Wildlife eats the poison when they find it left outdoors, a
Stanislaus study done close to urban areas, 23 out of 24
rodenticides. A sick Northern Spotted Owl found recent

Most wildlife that ingests poisons dies slowly, quietly, w
impact that rodenticide

elated that he seemed to be doing so well. Against all odds he was being wild.

Sadly Junior was recaptured recently, a few months after his release. He had made several visits to a nearby park looking for human attention. Turkey Vultures can bite and Junior could pose a threat to small children. He will remain in captivity now, as an educational bird, and my hope is that his story will help others of his kind and teach us all that the wild should be wild!



Photo by Alex Godbe

and not just rats!

ometimes seek a quick solution to keep our family safe. But us-
ts, and our local wildlife. According to Poison Control Center
ently eat rat poison EVERY YEAR. Pets have also been known
at rat poison.

predators eat the poison by eating poisoned rats. In a CSU
dangered San Joaquin Kit Foxes had detectable amounts of
in Fairfax had most likely eaten one or more poisoned rats.

out our seeing them, so we will probably never know the full
have on our wild neighbors.

Thank you for another wonderful Evening with Owls!

Our second annual evening was another success! It's good to know we are not the only ones passionate about owls! We are sorry that some of you were not able to attend because we ran out of space! Very special thanks to Joe Mueller for hosting and sharing his entertaining and knowledgeable perspective on owls. We are grateful to Charlotte Torgovitsky for hosting us at MAGC, to Mary Blake, Lisa Owens Viani & Riley, all of our other volunteers, and to Kate Marden of Planet Canine and her Eurasian eagle owl Cailleach, and Jim Tigan and his Lannier falcon, Strega. We washed all the fun down with great wine from Night Owl Wines.

Save the date! Our next evening is Thursday, November 15, 2007

Sponsored by the Garden Education Council of the Marin Art & Garden Center [www](http://www.gardeneducation.org)

Is Your Box Occupied?

Now's the time for barn owl nesting. Please visit our web site to learn how to observe your box to look for signs of occupancy! And now's the time to be sure not to climb up to the box or in anyway move or disturb it.

Owls & Technology

Wanted: Marin owl lover who fears no technology! We need a volunteer to help us with our owl cam project at San Domenico School. We have a DVR and need help swapping out hard drives, downloading the video footage to DVD, and editing.

Call Alex Godbe, 415-454-4587.

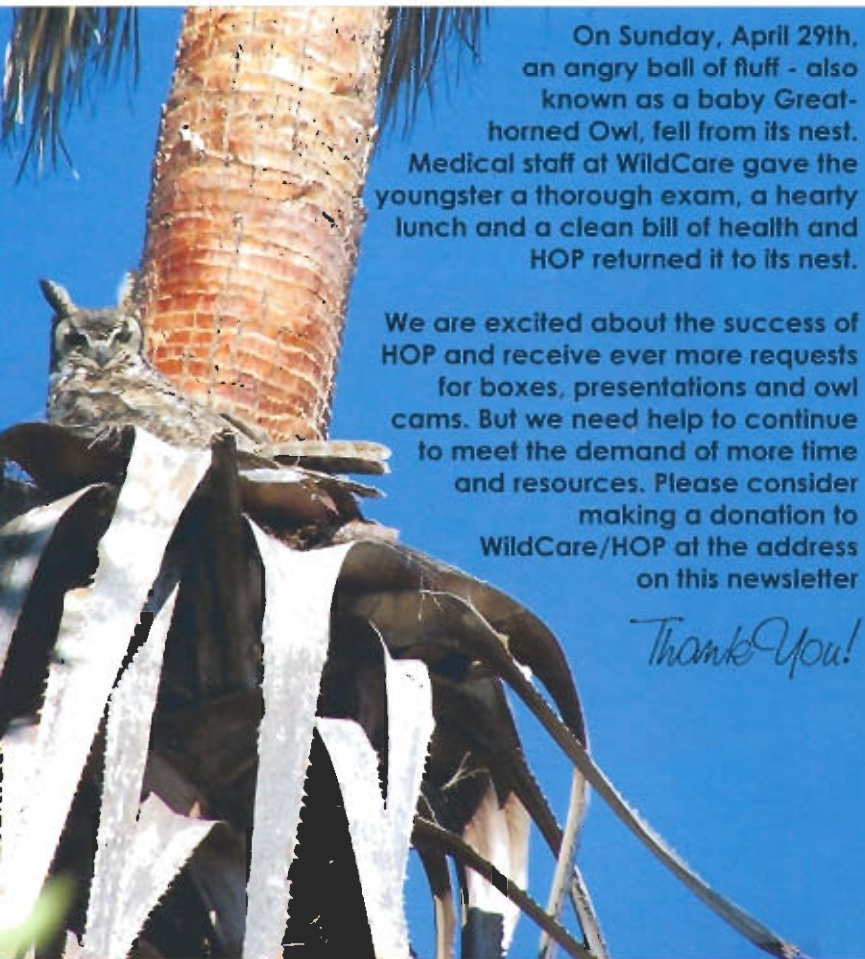


The Hungry Owl Project
A Program of WildCare
www.hungryowl.org

179 The Alameda
San Anselmo, CA 94960-1234

Non-Profit Organization
U S POSTAGE
PAID
San Rafael, California
Permit No. 52

HOP is a program of WildCare
76 Albert Park Lane/San Rafael, CA 94901



On Sunday, April 29th, an angry ball of fluff - also known as a baby Great-horned Owl, fell from its nest. Medical staff at WildCare gave the youngster a thorough exam, a hearty lunch and a clean bill of health and HOP returned it to its nest.

We are excited about the success of HOP and receive ever more requests for boxes, presentations and owl cams. But we need help to continue to meet the demand of more time and resources. Please consider making a donation to WildCare/HOP at the address on this newsletter

Thank You!



The San Domenico owl cam is currently transmitting images of this year's owl family - tune in at www.hungryowl.org/ww