



# Giving a Hoot

—Their nest tree cut down, can two great horned owlets survive? Volunteers, wildlife rehabilitators and good samaritans give their all.

BY BRIAN BUTTON

**W**hen an eastern Iowa community wanted a tree removed, hired workers raised their boom truck bucket to begin. That spooked a great horned owl. It fled. With chainsaw engine set to “choke,” a pull of the cord fired it up. Sawdust sputtered down like eye-irritating snow.

Branch-by-branch, limb-by-limb, pieces large and small fell. Then, workers found one tree section that contained an owl nest. Two tennis ball-sized fluffy owlets in a small wood chunk were lowered to the ground, and workers called a wildlife rehabilitation group in Iowa City.

For the owl family, the best solution would be delaying

tree removal a month to let owlets grow and naturally leave, recommended Sonja Hadenfeldt, coordinator for the RARE Group—the Raptor Advocacy, Rehabilitation and Education group in Iowa City. RARE volunteers could aid with re-nesting.

The advice, however was too late. By then, the tree was already down.

So volunteers from RARE drove 30 miles to survey the scene for options. Hadenfeldt hoped to re-nest them in their original area. There were two obstacles, however. “Unfortunately the nest tree was cut to the ground,” she says. “The babies were so small that if moved to a nearby tree and artificial nest, I worried the parents couldn’t find them.” With older owlets,

PHOTO BY ERIC BURSON



no worries, but owlets this small can't make enough sound for parents to locate them. Without parents to feed and keep them warm, the owlets would starve or die of exposure.

Wildlife rehabilitators are always given a problem. They have to be solvers. Those owlets also had a timeline. They had grown in an egg and gotten too large. They needed out and used a special temporary sharp bump on the end of their little beak to poke a hole through a membrane to open an air sac inside the fat end of the egg. Doing so provided a limited air supply needed to break out of the shell. Then, they struggled and worked, pecked and pushed. Finally out of the egg, they were vulnerable, helpless. Eyes still closed and utterly dependent in their nest for parental care, they needed constant food and warmth beneath their parents.

Lacking suitable options and needing constant attention,

"I brought them home. They were still little white fluff balls. I had a few days of wiggle room before I had to really be concerned with their potential to imprint on me," she says.

To keep wildlife wild, she wore gloves, hat and face mask to hide her human features. "I never talked. I always fed them in a very quiet area. I kept it dark as possible when feeding—no unnatural lights, overhead lights, anything," says Hadenfeldt. And constant feeding.

The largest weighed 3.7 ounces. It would add 2.5 ounces the next two days in her care. "The weight they put on in those early weeks is just amazing," says Hadenfeldt.

### SEARCH FOR A SURROGATE NEST

Quick work was needed to find a surrogate great horned owl nest. They put out a call for help on their Facebook page and



other bird-related sites. Evidently birders flock together, for by the next morning, someone responded. They had an active nest in a backyard tree, complete with two parents sitting on it.

"They said it would be fine to come and try to get an extension ladder up," says Hadenfeldt. "The tree was just a bit taller than their house and they sent some photos." Looking at the images "we thought okay, maybe we can get an extension ladder up there." A RARE volunteer, Don Lund, went to see firsthand.

But it was a tall order. The report back was "probably not, pretty iffy." So Hadenfeldt and Lund tried to find somebody with a drone. They wanted to fly high enough to not disturb the nest, but to use a camera to zoom in. Did it contain eggs or owlets? If the latter, their age and size was essential. "We wanted a compatible match," she says. If those owlets were too old, they could harm those younger owlets currently in care of RARE.

But mother nature was not cooperating—too windy to fly. Now it was time to hatch another plan—find a bucket truck to reach the owl nest. Brainstorming, RARE members came up with the name of Greg Buckmeyer, who runs It's Gotta Go Tree Service in Iowa City. He was known to assist another RARE volunteer who needed occasional work to place kestrel nest boxes in high locations.

Hadenfeldt phoned him. "Okay, I'm just going to put it out there. I'm a nonprofit. I have no money. I can't pay you, but I have babies that need to go up in a nest."

Buckmeyer replied, "Okay, let's do it." "I was shocked, because you just never know how people are going to be. And he's like, 'Yep, I got some bids and estimates to do Sunday but I can meet you at 4 p.m.'"

And that was that. The helpful homeowner of the tree—the one who kept their eyes open and knew they had a nest—allowed Buckmeyer's truck into their backyard.

Minutes later it was time to go up and peer inside the nest. "Buckmeyer got me strapped in my harness," says Hadenfeldt. The bucket lifted skyward. "My concern was once we got up, there'd be eggs in the nest or babies a lot farther along developmentally than my babies were," she says.

The nest held two owlets, maybe within a day or so in age of the two orphans. They were all the same size. "I was relieved. I felt like a weight was lifted off of my shoulders."

Hadenfeldt set the new pair in. "We were up and down in minutes. It was very easy. Then we got the heck out of there as quickly as possible," she says. Speed minimized further disrupting the parent owls, off somewhere hiding or hunting, no doubt. Quiet returned to the backyard. The homeowner reported that about 15 minutes after the truck left the parents returned.

To the uninitiated, it seems odd to add owlets to an occupied nest. That works? Can one imagine checking their newborn baby in a crib to discover a second infant? Or twins that became a quartet?

But owl parents take in newcomers. "My mentor, Jodeane Cancilla, who started RARE back in 2015, always said 'birds can't count.' As long as I have two viable parents, I felt confident I was doing the best I could for these birds to put them into that nest. Those wild parents are going to teach them how to be wild. Teach them to hunt. And I don't have to worry about them imprinting" on human caregivers, she says.

To help the adult owls, Hadenfeldt left something else in the nest—a food gift.

"This was my peace offering. I figured I'd help if I could," she says of the caloric blessing—a good-sized rat and a mouse. Perfect owl food.

Fortunately, great horned owls accept rodent treats. RARE spends about \$6,000 annually for rodents to feed raptors in their care. "So, yeah, it's expensive to feed these guys," she says of the roughly 150 raptors they help every year with donated funding.

It would be too labor intensive to aid all those raptors, plus raise their own mice and rats. With lots of work and limited volunteers, one can't Mickey Mouse around, so they order rodents from a supplier. "When we have eagles, we ask the public to fish for us and have fish donations dropped off." They freeze any surplus. "Every once in a while, we get ospreys and need to buy live minnows." Ospreys only eat live fish.

### FIND HELP

With few exceptions, all wildlife in Iowa is protected and federal and/or state permits are required to rehabilitate injured animals. Iowa's privately licensed wildlife rehabilitators generally work on their own time to rehabilitate and release animals without public funding.

If you find injured wildlife in need of help, it is best to contact the nearest rehabilitator for guidance. There are licensed wildlife rehabilitators statewide. Although one may be based numerous counties away, they may have volunteers in your area. Some will travel to provide aid or give you instructions on how to safely bring the animal to them. Rehabilitators are often volunteer, non-profit and donation supported—they are not "paid to provide you service" and also may not be able to help all types of wildlife.

Find a list of licensed rehabilitators listed by county at [iowadnr.gov](http://iowadnr.gov) and search for "rehabilitators" or call the DNR to help find a rehabilitator at **515-725-8200**.

ABOVE RIGHT: Wildlife rehabilitator Sonja Hadenfeldt places two great horned owlets into a surrogate nest. The owlets became homeless after their nest tree was cut down. The new nest has same aged owlets and two active parents. Fortunately, owl adults accept their adoptive parent responsibilities.

PHOTO LEFT BY ERIC BURSON, PHOTOS RIGHT COURTESY KATHLEEN JANZ



“For Cooper’s and sharp shinned hawks, we try to keep quail on hand,” she says. While this seems like a lot of special diets, raptors are a lot easier to feed she says, noting that songbird rehabilitators require many varieties of live, dried or frozen insects, berries, seeds and more.

“I’ve had a few people ask if we’ve gone back to check on the owlets,” she says.

She hasn’t. “The best thing we can do is let them be. To hover and be around will only aggravate or antagonize the parents. This is the second year they’ve nested there. Owl parents know what they’re doing.”

INSURING RAPTOR RECOVERY

You’d imagine RARE Group coordinator Sonja Hadenfeldt has a biology or veterinary background. Nope. “I worked for an insurance company for 36 years.”

By accident, her raptor interest began decades ago when her now-adult children were in middle school. Her daughter found an injured hawk, which the then functioning MacBride Raptor Center took in. “They rehabilitated that bird and my daughter, probably 12 at the time, got to release it. “There she was, holding a hawk and throwing it up in the air and it’s like, damn, that’s cool.”

“Fast forward, my kids are all gone now and I find another injured hawk, probably in the spring of 2016. I was trying to find somebody because MacBride had closed. I ended up getting in contact with Jodine and they took that hawk in. And at that point they were just starting to form RARE and getting everything ready to start doing rehab.”

Hadenfeldt told her husband she was going to get involved as a volunteer.

“And he’s like, ‘Yeah, you’re not going to do it.’ And it’s like, ‘I am.’”

She has volunteered 10 years and is now RARE’s coordinator. There are different levels of volunteerism based on experience and comfort levels in handling birds. RARE also has six licensed rehabbers.

“We’ve just grown every year. I think I’m up to about 40 volunteers. Nobody is paid. We’re a nonprofit run solely by volunteers. We answer and check our phones every day of the year. So, yeah, somebody’s covering Christmas and Easter and the Fourth of July. We answer it from 8 to 5. If you can’t get us, you go to voicemail,” which is checked daily.

Many people have little knowledge about raptors—birds of prey. “RARE stands for Raptor Advocacy, Rehabilitation and Education. We go around and do 30 to 40 education programs every year,” she says. They take along education raptors—live birds whose extensive injuries prevented their re-release.

Their Johnson County facility is a clinic type setting



GET INVOLVED  
Donate or become a volunteer. “We’re always looking for volunteers,” says RARE coordinator Sonja Hadenfeldt. Volunteers are trained to pick up and transport injured wildlife to the Johnson County facility. Injured raptors come as far away as Clinton, Burlington, the Quad Cities and everywhere in-between. “I’ve gotten birds as far north as Dubuque,” she says. Volunteer are often needed to help transport injured birds. Learn more, volunteer or donate at [theraregroup.org](http://theraregroup.org), on their Facebook page or call **319-248-9770**.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF RARE



Recovered from injuries, wildlife rehabilitator Sonja Hadenfeldt releases a red-tailed hawk back into the wild.

with stainless steel cages, medications, and areas for treatment. Donations pay for rent, medicine and rodents to feed raptors in need of care. As volunteers, people aren’t at the facility all the time. “We’ve had people just drop birds at our door and you need to call and make an appointment so we can make sure somebody’s there.”

The group works closely with two local veterinarians, Dr. Mary Ebert of Gentle Heart Pet Clinic and Dr. Kim Vercande at Best Friends Pet Clinic, who provide expert medical care to set difficult broken bones, provide x-rays, diagnoses and other involved treatments. Both graciously donate their time and services.

RARE’s licensed rehabilitators and volunteers aren’t miracle workers. Sometimes injuries are simply too severe to help—multiple compound fractures that need pins or intensive surgeries for example. Raptors with severe head traumas are also difficult cases. “Those birds are euthanized unfortunately, but it saves them from being left out in the wild to die a slow, painful death.”

They follow set guidelines and protocols. “If it’s a closed fracture, we’ll go in for X-rays, but we can get those wrapped up and make sure they’re immobile until we can get in to do X-rays. So there’s a lot of stuff we can do, but ultimately, we confer back with these vets to make sure what we’re doing is consistent and the best procedure,” says Hadenfeldt.

RARE also keeps flight cages and educational birds at Two Horse Farm Park in Solon in partnership with Johnson County Conservation Board.

It’s all a labor of love. Fortunately for those two owlets in the cut-down nest tree, there are devoted, trained rehabilitators and their volunteers who give a hoot. 🦉

**MOST COMMON RAPTOR INJURIES**  
Injured or ill raptors come into the care of licensed wildlife rehabilitators from many causes. Most common are collisions with motor vehicles as raptors often hunt rodents and snakes along roadways due to habitat loss.

While collision injuries happen all year, other cases are seasonal, says Sonja Hadenfeldt, coordinator for Johnson County-based RARE Group.

In spring they get a lot of fledged babies that people mistakenly think are abandoned, she says.

People pick them up when they should simply be left alone. Their parent is hiding nearby waiting for you to leave. “They don’t need to be rescued. Everybody thinks if it’s on the ground, it has to be hurt. That’s where they spend the first couple weeks of their lives until they figure out flying. Just leave them alone. If you feel they are injured or question their health, take a photo to send or call us.”

When people call RARE or another rehabilitator facility for advice first, the outcome is better. First, the bird may not need help. If it does, “We may tell you to contain the bird and how to do so,” says Hadenfeldt.

Instead, people take them inside to try and raise or keep. First, that is illegal. “Then we have birds that have become imprinted on humans,” she says. Not good.

Drought conditions also cause injuries and illness. “Late last summer, early fall, it was dry. We had a lot of dehydration, starvation,” she says. Young raptors haven’t fully become efficient hunters. “So they’re down, they’re dehydrated, they’re not hunting and finding what they need,” she says.

In autumn, Hadenfeldt says eagles and turkey vultures start entering RARE in greater numbers. “We see a lot of lead poisoning because of either lead shot or sinkers.”