



howard county
BIRD CLUB
50th ANNIVERSARY • 1972 – 2022

MEMBERS' MEMORIES

Nanine Rhineland

One September many years ago, a Barn Owl with a broken wing was brought to us by a neighbor, so Chandler Robbins referred us to a local authority whose family had sheltered a blind Barn owl over the summer. Jim, after inspecting the owl, said that it had a compound fracture and needed a pin in its wing. He estimated veterinary fees at about \$60. As a falconer he had some frozen baby chicks on hand which he generously gave to us to start feeding the owl. (One of the problems in harboring unusual wildlife is supplying a reasonable facsimile of their normal diet.) We knew that it was against federal and state laws to keep dead, injured or homeless birds (except House Sparrows, European Starlings, and Rock Doves) without a permit, so I had visions of being caught red-handed with an illicit owl!

First things first. The owl, christened "Hootman", needed expert medical attention. I called a bird specialist in Bowie, but he was not interested in donating his expertise. So I picked up the cage and carted Hootman over to the local vet, a friend of long standing, who agreed to give the injury "the old college try," pinning the wing joint. He said that Hootman would be able to fly in two weeks if the wing mended properly. He gave me an oral antibiotic to administer twice a day to counteract possible infection. Temporarily, we wrapped gauze around the damaged wing binding it to the owl's body. Regular adhesive tape would have pulled the feathers off, so a local clinic willingly gave us the end of a light adhesive paper, which was just enough to do the job.

Even though Jim had thoughtfully clipped Hootman's talons, the bird was a formidable adversary. Each time we handled him, particularly in the beginning, we were frankly terrified of his sharp talons and his awesome beak. Whenever anyone approached the cage, he swayed back and forth. When we opened the cage, he retreated to a corner ready to use his claws in self defense. I feel certain that our initial fear was communicated to him, but as we became better able to cope with him, he became less upset; but never in any did he condone our outrageous behavior or attentions. To get him out of the cage, we threw in a cloth into which he sank his talons; then we pick him up by the body. My husband held him and opened his beak while I force-fed first the antibiotic dissolved in water using a dropper and then cubes of lean beef placed in the back of his throat which he seemed to swallow involuntarily. It was obvious that he disliked the feeding operation intensely, glaring with regal condescension during the process. Meanwhile, I had written for an application for a special purpose permit. When it arrived, I filled it out and returned it. I had the uneasy feeling that I wouldn't receive the necessary permission but was buoyed by the hope that perhaps Hootman would "fly the coop" before the federal agents arrived.

After two weeks the day arrived to set Hootman loose, but in a trial flight he seemed unable to rise more than two feet off the ground. When we attempted to retrieve him, he sank both claws into my husband's hand. The owl let out the most unbelievable screech which continued at ear-boggling decibels until we freed him from his "prey." To this day I'm not sure which bothered my husband more, the pain of the sunken talons or the unearthly screaming.

Five days and several trial flights later Hootman flew to some nearby dense deciduous woods at dusk. His wings were not precisely symmetrical, but he was certainly ready to fend for himself. It was a moment of relief and triumph for all of us.

A week later I received a telephone call from the Chief Law Enforcement Agent for Maryland and Delaware granting my special purpose permit. I was delighted to report that the Barn Owl and our family had both reverted to their natural states.