

Just When You Think You've Seen It All Story and photos by Cindy Williams

I don't know about you but I thought I had a pretty good handle on the type of birds found in our area. Over the years I've come to realize there's a lot more going on in the skies, trees, forests and lakes than I thought; still I feel that I'm familiar (either through the bird feeder or the rehab hospital) with just about every bird that the KC metro has to offer. But every once in a while something still comes along that surprises me. Like an American Woodcock.

I had to blink my eyes several times when I first caught sight of this unique bird. I was lucky enough to be there when it was brought to the Center by Kansas City Missouri Animal Control (we so appreciate when Animal Control from our local cities lends a hand to our wild furred and feathered friends). My first glimpse of him made me think that this was surely a bird that had been created by Picasso, with his seemingly misplaced eye and his comically long beak. This could not have been a real bird! But lo and behold this is really how an American Woodcock looks. What a fascinating bird, I had to find out more.

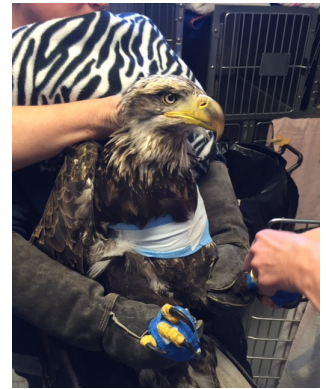


Turns out that while not ubiquitous in our area they are certainly not rare either. Missouri is considered part of their breeding territory which includes most of the eastern half of the United States. Our area would be just about as far west as they extend, possibly intruding slightly into Kansas. They winter mostly in the Gulf states and along the eastern seaboard. Although they are considered a "shore bird" they actually hang out in young forests and shrubby meadows – their camouflage is perfect for the forest floor. And their strange appearance isn't even the weirdest thing about them. The tip of their upper bill is actual flexible. You might even call it prehensile. They use their long bill and long, rough tongue to dig worms and bugs out of the leaf-covered ground. Mostly nocturnal, they are rarely seen except during the spring when they engage in a rather conspicuous mating dance which includes launching up into the air, flying erratically and then diving back to the ground. Sounds like they put on quite a show for their intended.

Luckily for this interesting specimen of a bird he wasn't badly injured – an abrasion across what would be the bridge of his nose, if he had a nose, and a swollen right eye. Probably a bit of a head injury as well. He was soon right as rain and able to be released which is a really good thing because he wasn't having any of the food that we offered him. We kept him long enough to give him antibiotics for any possible infection then let him go as soon as possible – tubing a bird like that multiple times a day doesn't make for a happy Woodcock. Hopefully he's made his way to the Gulf and is happily plucking worms from the dirt even as we speak. Or type. Or read.

Another guest that showed up this month is one that is easily recognizable, although you might be momentarily thrown by her speckled head. This Bald Eagle hasn't grown into her "bald" head yet. Another clue to her youth is the dark coloration on her beak. Bald Eagles reach sexual maturity at around five years of age, at which time they will have white feathers on their head and tail and a bright yellow beak. We figure this girl to be around three to four years of age. Females are about 25% larger than males and this one is pretty darn big, hence the designation of "her".

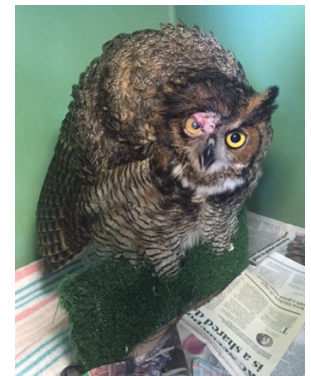
She was brought to the Center from Alma, Missouri. A farmer spotted her in a field unable to fly and an initial examination indicated a bad break to her left wing. Whenever a break involves both the parallel bones of the radius and ulna, or if the break occurs too close to a joint we know that the bird will not heal to the point that it is releasable. A subsequent x-ray confirmed this to be the case. Normally we would be



compelled to euthanize a bird that can't heal enough to be successful in the wild – we are not in the habit of making pets out of wild animals. We do have a few exceptions for our education animals which require special permits as well as adequate housing and care. However, a Bald Eagle is a special case and we knew we could probably find placement for her somewhere. We also noticed that as we worked with her daily - applying bandages, tubing her with Lactated Ringers to rehydrate her, cleaning her cage, giving her medication – it started to appear that she was not unduly stressed by close proximity to us. In fact she started

eating whatever we gave her right away, no questions asked. This girl has a very healthy appetite. Both her lack of undue stress and her willingness to eat in captivity made us think that, perhaps, she could thrive not only in a sanctuary but possibly even as an education ambassador for her species. So as she heals we will be working with her to acclimate her to humans even more and see if she could be happy in that role. You can see from the picture that she's already ok taking food from a gloved hand (you don't see her actually eat it but take my word for it, she did – and many more pieces as well). So hopefully in spite of her permanent injury she can still have a decent life in captivity.

Compare this to the Great Horned Owl I wrote about last month with the injured eye and you can see the difference – check out this updated picture. You can see her eye is healing nicely and that she still, after a month of daily handling, hates the living daylights out of us humans. Good girl.



From one of the largest flying creatures to one of the smallest. That's right, I was careful not to call him a bird. The Big Brown Bat that came in this month for help is a mammal, not a bird. This little Big guy's species can be found throughout the Americas, except perhaps for southern South America and northern North America. This one came from the north alright – North Kansas City to be exact. He doesn't appear to be injured, he just came in dehydrated when someone found him down on the ground – here you can see a staff member offering him a little sip of water



through a syringe. Sometimes an animal just gets “down” and we don't ever know why. Bats have a hard time taking flight from the ground, they require a higher perch they can swoop down from. So maybe this little guy just had a failure to launch. Hopefully we can beef him back up in time to find a place to hibernate for the winter, otherwise we will have to keep him throughout the winter months and release him in the spring – not a good prospect for him.

From Woodcocks to Bald Eagles to Big Brown Bats – it's been an interesting month at the Center. But really it's always fun and interesting to be up close and personal with our wild neighbors, even if they don't always agree.