

RAPTOR WORKSHOP

Criteria for Successful Release of Rehabilitated Raptors

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This workshop considers the processes and decision pathways involved in getting a raptor from initial rescue to successful release. To function in the wild, raptors must be able to fly or soar for long periods and distances, and to detect, chase and catch their prey. The capture and kill is made initially with the feet. To breed in the wild, they also need appropriate social behaviour, developed through contact with their own species (parents, siblings) from infancy. For rehab to culminate in successful release, correct decisions need to be made from rescue to the end of the care period. The rescuer or carer first needs to determine whether a bird is either 'orphaned' or sick/injured, and identify its species and age. After first aid and intensive care, a long-term prognosis and decision are needed on when, or whether, to release the bird (or, alternatively, permanent care or euthanasia). At the rescue stage, 'enemies' of successful rehab and release include: insufficient details on the circumstances of the rescue (e.g. date, location, nature of trauma); misidentification; delay in seeking expert veterinary treatment; wrong food; and wrong housing. At the release stage, potential problems include: human imprints; premature release (e.g. too young or 'unfit'); and release with handicaps to feathers, limb bones (wings, legs, feet), or eyes. Catalysts for successful rehab and release include (at the rescue stage) full details on the rescue circumstances, correct identification, immediate expert treatment, correct food for the species and age, correct housing, and imprint-avoidance protocols, and (at the release stage) good 'fitness' or body condition, and no significant physical handicaps. Criteria for successful release include:

- not human-imprinted;
- can feed themselves, can hunt their own food;
- appropriate weight for species and sex, good body condition (muscle mass);
- most wing and tail feathers are intact (or impeded);
- no serious wing, leg or foot dysfunction;
- good vision.

Catalysts for evaluating and improving success include:

- full documentation of each case;
- annual summary statistics, collated by the 'parent' body at state or region level in a central database, by species, age, sex, date, location, nature of illness/injury, and outcome, properly published;
- banding of all releases, and analysis of summary statistics on subsequent band recoveries;
- for all dead or euthanased birds, retain post-mortem bodies as intact as possible (e.g. keyhole autopsy) and lodge them with a museum, with all pertinent details, or develop a reference skin collection as an aid to identification;
- subscribe to Australasian Raptor Association publications;
- document and publish case histories of successes or failures, to inform others of what worked or didn't work.