

## Saved From the Birds—Rescue of a Baby Owl

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Raucous bluejays and dive-bombing grackles diverted my attention from my gardening. I looked up. Across the alley where all the commotion was coming from, I saw a small, gray, fluffy owlet clinging to the neighbor's chain link fence. I walked to the fence and the birds flew to the trees, stopped dive-bombing, but continued to make noise. After carefully prying his talons from the fence, I tucked the baby owl into a large, plastic flower pot and covered him with my hand to keep him from escaping.

I knew this baby wouldn't have the instinct to bite me, but he was scared and his talons dug into my hand. The owlet seemed to be in excellent condition—no blood or broken bones. If I hadn't been there, he would surely have been killed by the gang of neighborhood birds—which instinctively knew he was an enemy.

After securing him in a pet carrier, I looked in the blue pages of the phone book for help. I almost called Wildlife Rescue, but realized this bird would get just the right care at Raptor Recovery. I called the first number and reached Elaine Bachel, who has been a Raptor Recovery volunteer for 21 years. She quickly said, "I am feeding seven other screech owl babies; one more won't be any problem at all."

A few hours later, Elaine arrived at our door carrying a cardboard box (with ventilation holes) and leather gloves, which she promptly put on before she picked up the owlet. Of all the raptors, Elaine has a special affection for owls, reflected by her license plate, "OWLS."

Before she left, Elaine wanted to see where I found the owlet. There could be other babies, she explained. I showed her and we found a hole in the large elm tree that could have been where the screech owl was nesting. She said that screech owls sometimes have so many babies, there isn't enough room in the cavity. These babies sometimes leave before they can really fly well enough to take care of themselves.

This seemed like a great NEBLINE



Elaine Bachel has been a Raptor Recovery volunteer for 21 years.

article, so, before she left, I asked Elaine if I could come to her house, see the raptors and maybe take a few pictures.

The next evening, I arrived at Elaine's house. She first showed me several adult raptors that are under her care. She explained there are several reasons why these birds have not been released into the wild. Some have been imprinted by humans and do not have the ability to survive in the wild; others have had broken bones and cannot fly well. One falcon in captivity caught West Nile Virus a few years ago, is partially blind and could not survive in the wild. These adult raptors are used for educational programs. To keep wild birds, you need a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Elaine can keep these raptors because of the permit given to Raptor Recovery Network.

The screech owl babies were housed in a large, walking cage along with "Ariel," an adult screech owl. This adult will help the screech owlets from becoming imprinted.

### What does she feed them?

Elaine feeds the screech owlets sterile mice that come from UNL research facilities. These babies eat once a day.



"Ariel," an adult, red phase eastern screech owl

They do not pick their food apart, but eat the whole carcass, bones and all. The parts they cannot digest—like the bones and teeth—end up in their fecal pellet. You can tell what an owl has eaten by picking the pellet apart.

**What will happen to the owlets?** Unlike the babies of hawks which are on their own after weaning, baby owls need continued parental training to survive. After they leave the nest, parents teach them how to hide and hone their hunting skills. It is vitally important to return owlets to active parents. Elaine said owl parents readily accept young of their own species—all they have to do is make the right sounds. Elaine said once they can fly well, they would probably release two or three baby owls back in our neighborhood.

**Hazards for raptors.** Elaine explained some of the problems raptors face in the wild. Raptors can die from ingesting:

- rodenticides/poisons found in rodents and other animals. When raptors or scavenging birds eat animals that have been poisoned, it can kill them too. Screech owls also eat insects and can be poisoned by insecticides.
- lead shot found in wounded animals from hunting activities in the fall of the year.

### About the Eastern Screech Owl

The eastern screech owl looks like a miniature great horned owl. The only small owl with ear tufts, the eastern screech owl is about eight inches tall with a 11/2 - 2 foot wingspan. The screech owl may be either gray or red, but, in Nebraska, the gray phase is much more common with the red phase being relatively rare.

The range of the eastern screech owl is throughout eastern North America, from southern Canada to northwest Mexico.

While screech owls are found in woodlots and forests, they are also very common in suburban areas if there are adequate nesting and roosting sites. They survive well in these areas because there is not much competition from other predatory birds for food sources. They primarily feed on mice and insects, but will also eat pocket gophers, crayfish, snakes, frogs, fish and small birds.

The eastern screech owl nests in tree cavities, but will also nest in a man-made nest box, placed high above the ground in a mature tree. The male provides food for the female while she is incubating, but both parents feed the young. The adults are fiercely protective of the nest and dive at and strike at interlopers.

The screech owl is best located and identified by its sound, which is not actually a screech, but a series of mournful, quavering whistles descending in pitch. It is heard most often in the spring and fall. You can listen to this sound at [www.owlpages.com/sounds.php](http://www.owlpages.com/sounds.php)



Baby gray eastern screech owls

## Raptor Recovery Nebraska

In 1976, the Raptor Recovery Center was organized as a project of the Wachiska Audubon Society of Lincoln, Nebraska. It is located in Elmwood.

Since its beginning, the Raptor Recovery Center has treated more than 6,000 birds of prey, and better than 50 percent of those have been released back to the wild. This makes the percentage of birds released one of the highest in the nation.

In 2000, the center changed its name to Raptor Recovery Nebraska (RRN). RRN is an educational, non-profit organization and the only group



in the State of Nebraska permitted by the state and federal government to rehabilitate orphaned or injured raptors. Betsy Finch is RRN's executive director. Their all-volunteer organization works with the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission and animal control agencies to respond to reports of injured or orphaned raptors throughout the state.

Once contacted by a resident or conservation officer in possession of an injured bird, RRN arranges for a volunteer to pick up the bird and relay it to the center in Elmwood or to the nearest trained rehabilitator. Raptors

needing medical attention are seen by a veterinarian or the Center Director, then rehabilitated so they can be released back into the wild.

Before they are released, injured and orphaned raptors are banded. Some injured birds cannot be fully rehabilitated. Non-releasable birds are channeled into breeding programs, recruited as "foster parents" for young orphans, utilized in research and featured in the Center's educational programs.

### Local Raptor Recovery Numbers

- Elaine Bachel 488-7586 (Lincoln)
- Carri Honz 483-4303 (Lincoln)
- Janet Stander 525-8682 (Lincoln)
- Betsy Finch 402-994-2009 (Elmwood)

For more information about RRN, go to [www.raptorrecoverynebr.org](http://www.raptorrecoverynebr.org)

### Raptor Recovery Guidelines When you Find an Injured Raptor

- Approach the bird from behind, if possible.
- Cover the bird completely with a towel, blanket, jacket or any light-weight item.
- Quickly restrain the bird under the covering.
- As the bird calms down, gather the covering together, being careful to keep the bird covered completely. Be sure the wings are folded against its body.
- Transfer the bird to a well-ventilated cardboard box as soon as possible.
- Contact Raptor Recovery Nebraska or the Nebraska Game and Parks Commission immediately.
- Do not attempt to treat or feed the bird yourself. Many well-meaning attempts have resulted in further injury or the death of a bird.