

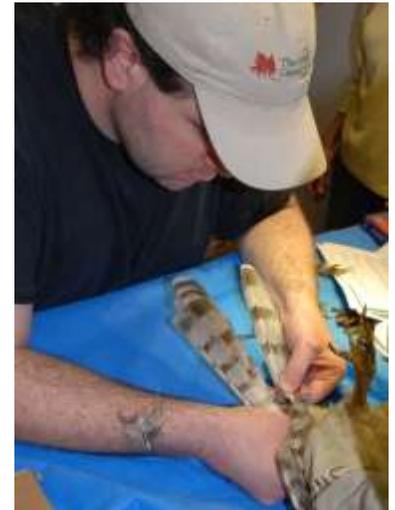
Wildlife Clinic Gives Hawk a New Tail

PHILADELPHIA, PA (March 23, 2012) – A local hawk is flying free again thanks to an unusual tail feather transplant at the Schuylkill Center’s Wildlife Rehabilitation Clinic. Using a millennia-old falconer’s technique known as “imping,” the clinic grafted a dozen feathers onto the damaged tail of an injured Cooper’s hawk, rebuilding a working tail. After a couple of days of practice flights, the lucky bird was released into the wild last week.

The Cooper’s hawk was brought into the clinic in February with multiple injuries, including head trauma and a severely damaged tail. The clinic nursed the bird for several weeks as it recovered from a concussion and regained its strength. The bird’s tail feathers, however, were still tattered, preventing proper flight. “A bird’s tail is its steering and its brakes,” explained clinic director Rick Schubert. “Without it, there’s no control.”

Waiting for new feathers to grow in could have necessitated months of captivity, which, according to assistant rehabber Michele Wellard, would be very stressful for the bird. “So, we decided to make the fix and send him on his way,” said Wellard.

Replacing a bird’s tail feathers is an intricate procedure, as each replacement feather must match the original in size, type and placement, as well as the angle and positioning of the feather. Before beginning work on the live bird, clinic staffers carefully examined, sorted and laid out all the donor feathers with labels indicating their designated position on the bird’s tail. Next, the tips are cut off of the donor feathers and patient’s torn feathers are cut down almost to the base, exposing the hollow interior of each feather. Finally, Schubert used small bamboo skewers and epoxy to attach the new feathers to the old. For each feather, one end of the skewer is glued into the donor feather; the other end is then slid into the base of the existing feather until the two feather tips meet. When done correctly, the skewer is completely hidden inside the hollow feathers and everything works as good as new.



Clinic director Rick Schubert attaches new feathers to the hawk's tail.

The hawk was sedated and wore a hood covering his eyes throughout the procedure to minimize his stress. “When he tried out his tail for the first time, he looked a little confused initially, but he took to his new tail pretty quickly,” said Wellard. In time, new feathers will grow in, pushing the grafted feathers out naturally.

The clinic held onto the bird for a few more days, supervising short practice flights until they were confident the new tail was working properly. When the hawk was released near the Schuylkill Center’s wooded property, he immediately took flight, looking no worse for wear.

All birds rely on their tail feathers for proper flying, but for a small raptor like a Cooper’s hawk, a full, healthy tail is critical. Cooper’s hawks prey largely on other birds, relying on speed and agility to steer quickly through tree cover in the hunt for food.

March 31 event supports the clinic

Lovers of hawks and other wildlife can learn more about the clinic’s work at the upcoming supply drive and fundraiser, **Creature Comforts, March 31, 11:00 am – 2:00 pm**. The family-friendly event will feature live wildlife presentations, a nature walk and other fun activities. Admission is free but all participants are encouraged to bring an in-kind gift of cleaning or pet supplies to help stock the clinic’s shelves for the busy spring and summer seasons. Call the Schuylkill Center at 215-482-7300 x110 for more details.

Founded in 1965, the Schuylkill Center for Environmental Education (SCEE) is one of the first urban environmental education centers in the country. It encompasses over 365 acres of privately held land in the Roxborough neighborhood of Philadelphia. A nonprofit organization, SCEE’s mission is to promote the preservation and improvement of our natural environment through education, outreach and the conservation of its land.

For more information, photos or interviews please contact:

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