Stanislaus Wildlife Care Center

Summer 2025

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# Creature Feature

# Two Hawks

## Red-Tailed Hawks & Swainson's Hawks

These are Holly, an adult, female red-tailed hawk, on the left, and Apollo, an adult male Swainson's hawk, on the right. They live in our display building and can be viewed whenever we are open. Both are non-releasable.

As is common in birds of prey, females are bigger than males. And red tailed hawks are bigger than Swainsion's hawks. So, Holly is much larger than Apollo. However, they get along fine.

When the Stanislaus Wildlife Center started in 1984, we received quite a few red-tailed hawks, but we never got a Swainson's hawk. Today, we still get a lot of red-tailed hawks, but we also get a lot of Swainson's hawks. What happened? Why are Swainson's here now when they weren't around then?

Both are large buteos, or hawks with broad wings and tails, who spend time soaring on the thermals. Both hunt mice, gophers, and other small critters. Both build big stick nests high in trees. And, unless you know what to look for, they almost look alike. Especially the young ones. So, did the Swainson's invade the Central Valley, or did it return from the brink of extinction?

Swainson's hawks migrate from Canada to South America and back every year. They spend our winter, Argentina's summer, on the open plains eating grasshoppers. These are not our little grasshoppers. They are crop-destroying locusts, often several inches long.

In 1980, there were only about 350 Swainson's hawks in California. Pesticide use in Argentina had decimated their population. Since then, the South American farmers have changed their farming practices to better protect the hawks. That has led to a resurgence in their population, but they are still listed as threatened.

**The Mission of SWCC is to promote respect for wildlife & increase the public's awareness of the importance of preserving wildlife through the care of injured and orphaned California native wild animals and community education.**

Red-tailed hawks also migrate, but not all of them. Those who live in very northern areas, like Canada, migrate to the southern US or even Central America. But ones living in milder climates tend to stay all winter.

Throughout the year, red-tails eat mice, gophers, voles, and other small mammals.

Their population in this area is stable.

The bird on the left is a juvenal Swainson's hawk and the bird on the right is a juvenile red-tailed hawk – two of the many babies we raised this year.

Red-Tailed Hawk Hatching

One week old Swainson's hawk

Because Swainson's migrate and red-tails are here all year, we receive the babies in two separate waves. The red-tails come first. The first babies arrive in late April or early May. Swainson's are later starting in early June.

The hatchlings look almost alike. Red-tails are a little fuzzier, with more ivory-colored down and duller feet and cere – the fleshly part of the beak around the nostrils. Swainson's down is shorter and neater looking, and their feet are a bit more yellow.

It isn't long before body feathers start poking through the down and the color difference becomes obvious – if you know what to look for. If not, they will still look the same.

Even if you can't see the adult red-tail's reddish tail, you can make a good guess at which birds you see. Red-tails will sit in a tree or on a fence post waiting for a hapless mouse to venture out. But if you see a flock of large hawks cruising around a field, they are Swainson's hawks socializing while they hunt for mice, grasshoppers, or other edible critters.

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Two Week Old Red-Tailed Hawks

# Volunteer Viewpoint


By Lori Dugan

I started volunteering at SWCC just 6 months ago, and all I can say is WOW. I have learned firsthand how much dedication and hard work go into taking care of injured and orphaned animals in my community. I have been able to work closely with animals and birds in need and be part of rehabbing them back into the wild. It is rewarding, educational, and a little dirty.

I have a deep respect for the expertise of the staff at SWCC. They care for a variety of wild animals while always taking the time to teach and support me and all the other volunteers. I have learned how to prepare food, clean enclosures, and safely handle some animals.

One of the most fascinating things I've witnessed and learned about is how baby great horned owls are cared for, specifically the role of the adult resident owls in fostering them.

When a baby owl is injured or orphaned, one of the great horned owls that lives at SWCC will step in and support this baby, help with feedings, and make them comfortable. I'm sure there is a more technical way to describe the behaviors and interactions, but what I see is an excellent surrogate parent guiding that baby towards an eventual release back to nature.

Here is a picture of Percy, SWCC resident owl, with an orphaned baby owl.

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Percy is a male great-horned owl. Although e very tame and calm, he is also a great father. He watches over and feeds tiny babies.

This baby great-horned owl is able to feed himself, but he is much younger than all of the other great-horns we have, so we are leaving him with Percy for a while longer.

# What's on the Menu Today?

Who eats what? Here is a sampling of what various animals are fed.

## Ducks and Geese

Some things are easy. Ducks and geese get crumbles. But it isn't always that simple.

Mallards and Canada geese eat crumbles from day one. They need the low-protein variety. If ducks and geese are fed too much protein, their muscles grow before their bones are strong, and their wings turn outward, a condition called angle wing. It makes it impossible for them to fly.

So far we have cared for two-hundred sixteen ducks and geese this year. That is a lot of crumbles.

## Killdeer and Avocets

Killdeer, avocets, and other shorebirds can eat within a few hours of hatching, so it should be simple. Just give them what they like. Almost.

The incubator must be close to 100°F. And they eat very tiny insects. We feed them frozen bloodworms sold as fish food. They can eat ten or more dollars' worth of bloodworms each day.

After ten to twelve days, they can move on to small mealworms and robins mix – a cat food based dry diet which is a lot cheaper and easier than bloodworms.

## Wood Ducks

Wood duck hatchlings are treated the same as killdeer, and they eat the same food. But without mama duck, they have a hard time learning to eat. We often have to gavage feed them for a few days. The killdeer diet is very high in protein, so as soon as the wood ducks can go to an outside brooder, they are put on low-protein crumbles to prevent angle wing.

## Opossums

Opossums are a special kind of animal. The babies don't nurse from bottles or syringes, so we have to tube feed them. We use a small, flexible tube on a syringe, insert the tube into their stomach through their mouth, and squeeze formula into their stomach. They learn that the tube means food and swallow it willingly.

Opossums are fed two different kinds of formulas, one when they are tiny and a different one when they are a bit bigger.

Our formulas are purchased from a company that specializes in making formulas for native wildlife. Typical dog and cat formulas are great for dogs and cats, but not so much for wildlife.

## Coyote, Fox, Raccoon

Coyotes, foxes, and raccoons all have their own unique formulas. Coyotes and foxes eat solid food when three or four weeks old, but raccoons start to wean at about ten weeks and aren't fully self-feeding until they are about twelve weeks, and they are big so they drink a lot at each feeding.

Each year, we go through three or four twenty-pound buckets of the powdered raccoon formula at $250 a bucket. Although that may seem expensive, the per ounce price is less than the per ounce price of common dog formulas sold on Amazon. We just use a huge amount of raccoon formula.

Grey Fox

## Cottontails

And, of course, there are cottontails. These are fed a formula that comes from Australia. Fortunately, it can be purchased on Amazon. But formula isn't the only challenge with bunnies. Cottontails are born tiny, naked, eyes closed and with a sterile gut.

They don't have bacteria in their digestive system, and the mother's milk keeps it that way. So, all feeding equipment has to be sterile. Syringes, nipples, and so forth can only be used once. Then the syringes, nipples, and so forth must be sterilized before being used again. Formula cannot be heated twice. It cannot be kept more than a day unthawed.

Bunnies use bacterial fermentation to digest their diet of grass. Eventually, they need to get the correct bacteria.

Adults make two kinds of feces. The normal one that is round and hard, and a special type of feces called a cecotrope that comes from the ceacum, a part of the intestine that contains the bacterial colony.

Rabbits reach around and eat their cecotrope as they are expelled. That is how the bacteria from the ceacum get into the stomach to digest grass and leaves.

Baby bunnies needs to eat a cecotrope to charge their digestive system. So, when the bunnies are about bunny, and put him in a cage with a wire floor. When he excretes cecotropes, he is unable to eat them, and they fall through the wire. After he deposits one or two, we put him back in his home cage with treats.

Cecotropes look like bunches of tiny, shiny black grapes.

At the right time in its life, a baby cottontail will eat a bit of cecotrope. He only needs to do it once. It will still be a few days before he eats alfalfa. And another two weeks or more before he is self-feeding.

Even if the cottontail is eating hay, as long as he is still nursing, the same sterilization is essential.

Minute amounts of formula-loving bacteria cause an often fatal diarrhea in bunnies. You, me, dogs, cats, squirrels, or raccoons can drink milk that has been in the refrigerator for two days, but the bunny can't.

## Squirrels

Two California ground squirrels doing a 'nose-to-nose' greeting. This is a common greeting among mammals.

If you have a cat, notice the quick little sniff it gives your face when you pick it up.

Squirrels also have their own formulas. Tree squirrels use one formula and ground squirrels a different one.

Squirrels are similar to raccoons in one way. They start to wean at eight weeks and are not completely self-feeding until around twelve weeks.

Before release, they need to learn to open walnuts and other hard seeds, which takes a few more weeks.

## Doves, and Songbirds

To get back to birds.

Adult finches and doves eat seeds. As babies, they are fed a grain-based formula with a custard-like consistency. But once they can feed themselves, they are fed seeds.

Mockingbirds, robins, kingbirds, and jays eat a varied diet. Besides going through several million mealworms each year, they also eat crickets, blackfly larvae, and other insects.

I am sure they would love to fill up on bugs, but that is prohibitively expensive, and it wouldn't provide a balanced diet. So, they also get eggs, fruits, vegetables, and a cat food based product we call robin mix.

Except the ravens and crows. They also get mice. Crows, and especially ravens, are very large birds. In the wild, they eat small rodents, baby birds, and eggs. They eat enormous amounts of food every day.

## Herons & Egrets

Snowy Egret

Of course, just to be different, herons and egrets eat fish. We order our fish from a supply house in Utah. Large bags of fish are delivered to the center frozen. That may seem like a long way to go for fish, but the company is reliable and reasonably priced. And the fish have been frozen, so each one is individually coated in ice. They don't freezer burn. It is easy to take out just the number needed. But they are rather expensive. And we use a lot.

## Raptors

Thanks to computer magic a red-tailed hawk, barn owl, and red-shouldered hawk are congregating in a clear blue sky.

Last, we come to the raptors.

We get three hundred fifty to four hundred hawks and owls each year. Their preferred food is mice. But frozen mice cost over a dollar each. During baby season, we would need two hundred mice per day, or more.

We get mice donated through the Sacramento Zoo twice a year, but that is barely enough to feed our resident raptors and our little guys, screech owls, and kestrels.

The red-tail hawks, red-shouldered hawks, great-horned owls, barn owls and other larger raptors are fed day-old ducks, which are donated by a local duck breeder. These are the hatched ducks that he doesn't need because they are the wrong sex. That saves us many thousands of dollars a year. But sometimes we have more hawks and owls than even he can feed.

To make up the difference we buy chicken from the grocery store or feeder chicks from a supplier of food for zoos. Chicks are cheaper than mice, but several times more expensive than chicken.

Hawks don't really like the chicken and whole animals provide a better diet. But they have to eat something.

This year we have had to buy lots of chicken. It has put quite a strain on our bank account.

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# Venmo is Here

### Venmo:@StanislausWildlifeCareCenter

We now have a Venmo account. Venmo is a safe and easy way to make donations.

Use the QR codes below to visit our website, send a gift from our Amazon wish list, or make a donation through paypal or Venmo.

Website | Amazon Wish List | PayPal | Venmo

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Facility Manager
Nancy Klein

Senior Animal Care Coordinator
Michelle Mason

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Duane Dahl
Eduardo Escobedo
Daniel Pankey
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California Ground Squirrel

## Moving??

If your address changes, please let us know. Send in the membership form or email:
SWCCenter@StanislausWildlife.org

# Membership Form

Name _____ Date_____

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City_____State_____Zip_____

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_____No Receipt _____Email Receipt _____Mailed Receipt

_____New Membership ____ Membership Renewal ____ General Donation _____ Restricted Donation

__$20 Individual__$30 Family __$50 Grantor __$100 Sustaining __$500 Contributor __ $1000 Donor Other $ _____

All donations are tax deductible and gratefully accepted. Please consult your tax advisor.
Make checks payable to: SWCC, P.O. Box 298, Hughson, CA 95326 - THANK YOU!
Please email SWCCenter@StanislausWildlife.org if you would like to volunteer.

The SWCC does not sell or give addresses to anyone!

*The SWCC is incorporated as a 501(c)3 corporation EIN 77-0049517*

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# Help! We are running out of money.

We don't usually ask for money in the newsletter, but this time we must.

This year has been financially difficult. One of our major donors passed away, leaving us short of the money we had come to rely on. We also received a larger-than-average number of some of the more expensive animals, animals that cost more to care for.

Since minimum wage increases each year, we must increase the employees' hourly wage. Although that is good for the employees, it is tough on our bank account. Labor costs have risen faster than donations. We are currently facing a shortfall.

Our volunteers are wonderful, but we can't operate without our highly trained paid staff.

**Without your donations, we may have to lay off staff and turn away animals in need.**

# Please help!