

## Hawks and Boys and Life's Challenge

I WATCHED FOR FEATHERS to flutter indicating breath and life, but the handful of fluff remained as still as its mattress of pine needles. The box once held size 13 sports shoes, but now brown pine needles softened the cardboard under the small pile of feathers and the ugly, bulging head of a baby Harris hawk.

"Maybe we should just stop and put it down by the side of the road and go back home," my husband said.

"No!" I said. We couldn't give up now.

Watching the Harris hawk fledglings in their nest, high in the Aleppo pine tree near our home, had felt like watching my sons growing up, taking risks and sometimes crashing to earth. When the little bird got big enough to pull himself up to the side of the dishpan-sized nest and teeter around the edge, my heart was in my throat. *He's going to fall*, I thought. But I remembered the rule when my sons were growing up: If they aren't going to break a bone, let them explore.

So as I watched and worried, the ball of tan fluff, still far removed from airworthy wing feathers, continued to seek adventure. Every day, while his parents were out looking for food, the toddler hauled himself up to the rim. His oversized head flopped on a pencil-thin neck.

"He's going to fall," I said.

Then one day, I went to pick up what looked like a frayed rope ball under the tree. When I looked closer, the oversized eyes and beak of our little explorer hawk peered back at me.

I made plenty of emergency-room trips when boyish, adventurous spirits went too far. But I wasn't sure what to do with this little creature. His high-pitched squeak warned me off as he lifted his head and wriggled deeper into the debris beneath his home tree.

Racing back to the house, I rifled the Yellow Pages. Looking under "Wildlife," I found "Wildlife Rescue"—just the help I needed.

The calm, experienced rescue worker explained that adult birds would generally continue to feed a little one that has fallen out of the nest. It might be helpful to put the bird in a box and prop it on a branch, she said, but I should not take it away from the tree and feed it. Take one shoe box and call me in the morning, seemed to be the advice.

The next day, I peeked into the box. This time the baby didn't try to wriggle away, and his warning chirp was barely a whisper. I called my new friend, Wendy the raptor rescuer, and she suggested we take our little adventurer to a nearby shelter. When I called the shelter, the caretaker said, "Come right over. I'll thaw some mice."

It was not an image that I wanted to pursue.

My husband drove and I sat in the back, open shoebox in my lap. After a few feeble protests, the bird sagged into the pine needles. I feared the worst.

Suddenly the head lifted slightly and beady little eyes blinked.



At the shelter, freshly defrosted mice proved the perfect medicine. The next day, Wendy returned to our home with our fledgling, climbed the tree and placed the little bird back in his 40-foot-high home.

The baby hawk spent the next weeks changing from fluff ball to feather duster to impressive aeronautical hunter. He graduated from hopping on the edge of the nest to hopping from branch to branch, sometimes with a tentative flapping of wings.

After nearly two months of flight training, the youngster finally swooped low across the desert and landed on a nearby spindly cholla cactus branch. During all this time, he continued to freeload on the adults, hollering for his share of their hunt even when he was nearly adult size.

The hawk's coming graduation stirred mixed feelings. After all, I had held him in my hand when he was mere ounces of feathers attached to beak and claws. For weeks he sat stoically on the low branches of the Aleppo, watching my every move as I photographed him from 5 feet away. Each day, I searched the branches, smiling when I located his hiding place. But still, I longed to see him soar overhead. It was time for him to leave the nest.

I often sit propped on pillows looking at the panorama of sky and mountains outside my bedroom window. Two mesquite trees etch erratic patterns across the pure-blue Arizona sky. One day as my mind wandered across the landscape, a hawk swooped in and landed on a mesquite branch no more than 6 feet above the ground. A small rabbit dangled from his beak. He made no attempt to eat his catch, or move to a more characteristic high perch. His white-spattered chest indicated his youth. One would think that a hawk would quickly eat his prey, before someone else came along to demand a share.

I called to my husband, "Our young hawk is back. And he's brought something with him."

Still, he sat.

I went outside. He stared at me across the swimming pool.

"Good job, hawk," I said.

He flew off to a taller tree nearby and ate his catch.

He had become an adult. And I was as proud as I was when my sons showed signs of trading recklessness for responsibility.

"Goodbye, hawk." ##