

REHABILITATION

General

Any bird that has had no hunting experience or has suffered a major trauma or illness and therefore been undergoing a lengthy convalescence, will almost certainly require some form of release preparation. Such birds may be quite capable of flying around in an aviary perfectly well and should be carrying plenty of flesh, however they will not be in condition and will be completely unfit. A bird released in such a state will almost certainly starve to death before it has built up the necessary muscle required to out manoeuvre and fly down its natural quarry. Therefore it is essential that released casualties are either fit before being given their liberty or have a controlled release with food back up.

There are numerous methods that can be employed, each having advantages and disadvantages. This chapter gives a very brief description of the most popular methods that can be used. The majority of which are variations of traditional falconry hack or falconry itself.

The term 'hack' originates from a process used to get young birds hunting prior to being trained for falconry. Birds are kept out at liberty and allowed to fledge from an artificial nest site. Birds instinctively return for food, which is left daily for them. Once they start to miss visiting the feeding site, it is an indication that they are starting to catch quarry for themselves and then they are usually caught up and trained. The advantage of birds being put through this process is that they learn how to hunt and get fit, which is exactly what we want to achieve with a young bird brought to the rehabilitator.

Habitat assessment

For any rehabilitation method to be successful the release habitat must be suitable for the species concerned.

Natural prey availability is an important factor when choosing any release areas. The prey normally taken by the species concerned should not only be available in reasonable numbers but also be resident in the habitat best suited to the hunting techniques employed by the species being rehabilitated. For example: a vole rich road embankment may be very rewarding for a Kestrel, which drops vertically onto its victims. Such a habitat would be disastrous for a Barn Owl, despite its natural prey being in abundance. Its method of flying low and constantly quartering the ground would inevitably cause the bird to make physical contact with a vehicle.

Thought should also be given to the status of any corvids in the proposed release area. Corvids will not normally tolerate any new predators appearing in their territory, especially during nesting time and will usually eject them from the vicinity very quickly. Taking into account how common corvids are, it is probable that they will be present in many selected hack areas, therefore birds going out to hack should have their territory enforced upon them before being given their liberty.

Any wild birds present of the same species as those being hacked can also affect the suitability of a selected site. Such areas should be avoided so as not to disturb any resident birds. It is accepted that this is almost impossible to achieve when dealing with our more common species, but should be applied whenever possible. This is of particular importance during the breeding season when conflicts are most likely to occur.

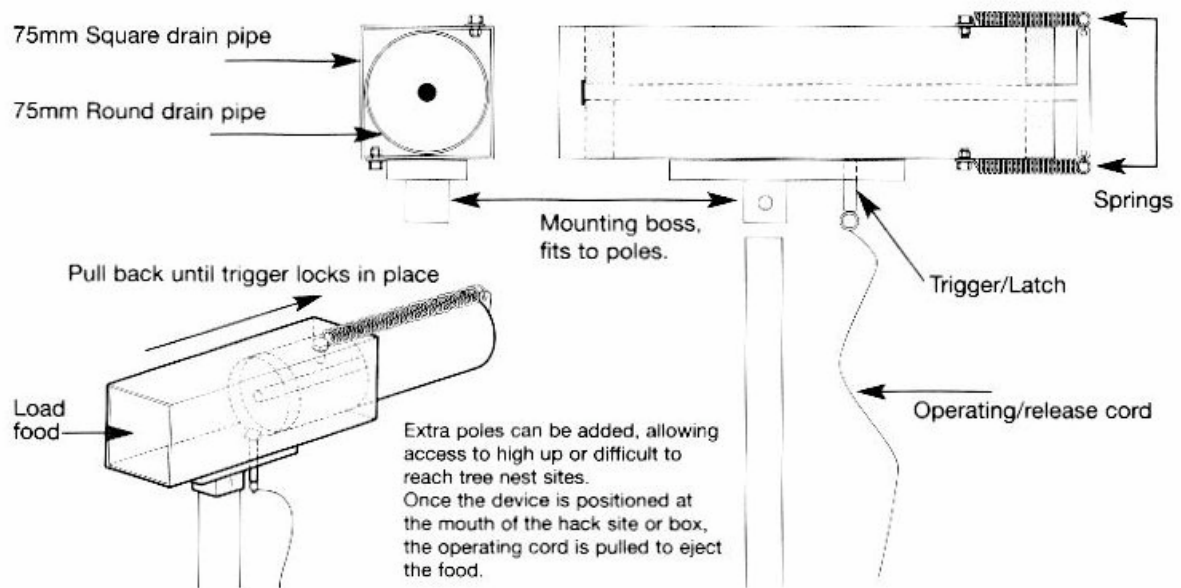
Permission and co-operation should always be obtained from the relevant landowners and managers before rehabilitating birds on their land.

Traditional Hack

This method is best suited for a complete brood or group of young birds of the same age. The method does not work as well for a single bird.

The birds are placed in an artificial nest site which is similar to that which would normally be used in the wild by that species. Food is placed into the nest on a daily basis but it is important that precautions are taken to stop the birds associating food with the provider.

Example of a device for delivery of food to hack site or box



Food should be discharged into the nest site using a chute, pipe or specially prepared device mounted on a pole or similar. Food is best deposited during darkness for diurnal species and during daylight for nocturnal species. An example of a pole mounted device is overleaf.

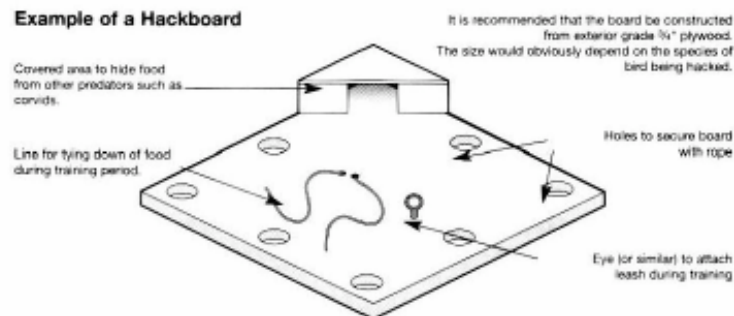
The age of the birds is of great importance. If already starting to branch or fledge then they are too old to be hacked in this way. Such birds would simply leave the hack site before any association has been made between the site and food, therefore they would not return and would almost certainly starve to death.

Birds of the right age will stay in the artificial nest long enough to associate it with food and are therefore far more likely to return. These birds eventually will leave the nest site, making daily journeys of ever increasing distances. Once such birds have been at liberty for two weeks and are still returning for food, rations should be reduced to encourage hunting. Some birds may have even started hunting in this short period of time, depending on individuals and the species.

Although this method is reasonably successful, birds do occasionally get lost prematurely and may be found dead in the area.

Hackboard

Once a bird has been assessed as ready for release training, a suitable habitat should be found and a hackboard installed.



This is simply a board where food can be tied down. It should also have a raised three sided compartment under which food can be hidden to keep it out of view from other predators, e.g. corvids.

The actual process involves training the bird to fly to the board for food and for this some falconry knowledge is essential. Initially the distance is only a couple of metres. The bird is allowed to feed on the food that is tied down to stop the bird trying to fly off with it. The distance the bird has to fly to the hackboard is gradually increased daily although a creance (safety line) is attached to the bird to avoid it going free prematurely. The bird is always allowed to finish its meal on the board.

After a few weeks the bird should be flying 50 metres to the board from different directions and it can now be flown free.

This daily flying continues until the bird starts to show signs of being confident in the area. He may rouse, feak and tuck a leg up following its meal. This is the time to give the bird its liberty but before finally release, the bird must be conditioned to finding food hidden under the three-sided compartment. This is

achieved by partially hiding the food so that the bird can still see it, eventually the food should be placed completely inside the compartment.

Once the bird is obviously aware of how to find the hidden food it can be released. Food is now left on a daily basis hidden in the compartment but not tied down. If all the training has gone well the bird should return daily for food. The process used in the traditional hack, of leaving food for a few weeks and then reducing rations can be employed here. Caution must be exercised in reducing rations too quickly or the bird will start sitting at the hackboard waiting for food.

This method of using a hackboard can be used for several birds together as well as individuals.

Aviary Hack or Lock-up

A building or aviary is used for this method, which is perhaps one of the least labour intensive ways of hacking, but is usually less successful than many of the other methods. It is best used for young birds that were too old to undergo a traditional hacking method. It also works reasonably well for scavenger species such as Buzzards and Kites. Like many of the methods it is also better if more than one bird is hacked from the aviary or building at the same time.

The method itself, involves placing the birds into an aviary or secure building that has a good view over the surrounding area, which obviously must be suitable habitat for the species concerned. An area of seclusion must be provided for the birds to seek refuge should they be disturbed or frightened by something. Food is let daily via a hatch or pipe to minimise any association of food with the feeder. One side of the aviary should be solid to shield the approach of the feeder. One side of the aviary or the roof should be able to be opened, remotely if possible e.g. by the use of a long rope. Following 4 to 6 weeks in the aviary the birds can be released.

It is very important that the actual release is carried out carefully to avoid frightening the birds out of the aviary. If they are frightened out, they are liable to panic and fly out of the area and are very unlikely to return. Rations should be reduced prior to release to encourage the birds to stay in the vicinity. Food is left daily as in other methods. Once the birds have been at liberty for a couple of weeks then rations should start to be reduced. This will encourage the birds to hunt or to search for carrion depending on the species.

One disadvantage to this method of controlled release is that the territory is not enforced upon the bird prior to being given their liberty as it is in other methods. This makes the bird very vulnerable to being driven out of the area shortly after release by corvids. If this occurs it is unlikely that they will return.

A slight variation of this method is considerably more successful and is usually used for introducing Barn owls to new areas. A breeding pair of birds are placed in an enclosed barn or other suitable building and are left there until

they breed and have young owls. The parents are then allowed to leave the building if they wish. However, because they have got young to feed they will return to the building. Food back up is continual and young birds will leave the building just as wild ones would do. If all goes well not only are the young owls hacked to the wild but also the parents. When this method is used the original parents often return to breed in the building the following year.

See the section about releasing Barn Owls under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 as a licence is required.

Lure Hack

This method involves training the bird to fly to a lure on a daily basis in the area where it will be released. This enforces the territory upon the bird prior to release. It works well for mature birds that have suffered major trauma or birds that just require muscle build-up. The bird is flown to the lure until it is considered to be in a fit condition and then it is released in the area where it has already been flown.

Visits must then be made daily, calling the bird to the lure. This should continue for a couple of weeks even if the bird is not seen. For birds that have had hunting experience this is very likely. The disadvantage of this method is that it enforces the food supplier upon the bird, which could be a major problem if young birds are concerned. Therefore this method is best reserved for birds known to have had hunting experience.

Kite Hack

This is a relatively new idea and involves training the bird to fly to a kite, to which food is attached. The bird is flown daily to the kite and every day the kite is allowed to go a little higher. Eventually the kite can be raised to several hundred feet. The food is attached by a special device, which allows it to be released when the bird strikes at it. This revolutionary method has several advantages. It enforces the territory upon the bird; it gets the bird extremely fit and when the kite is put up, the bird can see it from a very long distance.

Without written permission from the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) you must not fly a kite more than 200 ft (60 mtrs) above the ground. Nor are you allowed to fly a kite more than 100 ft (30 mtrs) above ground within 3 miles (5 Kilometers) of an airfield.

Full Falconry Hack

There can be little doubt that this method of rehabilitation is the ultimate for birds that have suffered a severe trauma. Unfortunately it is not suitable for all the species that may be encountered.

The method involves training the bird to accept man as a hunting partner. The bird gains fitness by constant flying at natural quarry in its natural

environment. The advantages of this method are that the bird's performance can be witnessed and assessed. Monitoring of its success can be used to decide when release should take place or if indeed it should take place at all. The method also introduces and familiarises the bird to its new territory. Birds are released where they have been flown once they are taking quarry on a regular basis.

