

Birdman keeps radio track of injured hawk as it makes return to wild



ORNITHOLOGIST Martin Turner has flown to the rescue of an injured sparrowhawk, using a new tagging and tracking device.

Martin, of Meadow Farm Nether Alderley, came to the aid of the forlorn raptor after it was found hopping around in a garden with an injured wing.

"Unfortunately, our aeries were full, so I took it to the RSPCA at Stapley Grange to recuperate," he explained.

Andrew Kelly, manager at Stapley, said: "X-rays showed a fractured ulna (wing bone), which is consistent with it having flown into a window."

The RSPCA strapped the wing with a bandage and let the bird recover in its cage.

Once the staff were satisfied the sparrowhawk had made a full recovery, they attached an innovative new tracking device to monitor how the bird of prey rehabilitates into the wild.

Andrew comments: "We won't attempt rehabilitation unless we

by Rachel Leslie

are confident it can reintegrate into its environment.

"For sparrowhawks that means catching prey and songbirds. One way is to radio track it to see if its integrating. So Martin volunteered to help.

The device helps the RSPCA determine if the bird survives and how well it re-adapts back in the wild.

Using superglue and light weight string a 2.5g transmitter has been attached to the bird's central tail feather which Martin can track within a 2km range using a receiver.

Andrew emphasised this would not be a burden for the bird and would not affect its behaviour, weighing less than 1 per cent of its body weight.

By the springtime when the bird moults, the tracker will be shed along with its feathers.

Tracking is facilitated by releasing the bird where it was first found.

"Many sparrowhawks die during their first year of life", adds Andrew.

"If the bird lives for six weeks, we'd see it had rehabilitated as it wouldn't be able to survive for more than two weeks without food.

"This is a pilot project for the RSPCA and we hope to track eight sparrowhawks next year. The whole point is to fit in with RSPCA rehabilitation monitoring to see if they [birds] survive after release, otherwise we're compromising their welfare."

Two days on Martin has tuned in to obtain and registered the sparrowhawk twice.

He adds: "We're ideally after three readings. I can use the map and compass to plot the area it could be in, so I can concentrate tomorrow in that area."

But hopefully it won't be too long, before the sparrowhawk can stretch its wings and really fly the nest.

If you find any injured wildlife, contact the RSPCA national call centre on 0870 555 5999.

Sparrowhawk factfile

● They were nearly wiped out in 1950's and '60's due to agricultural pesticides: DDT, aldrin and dieldrin which affect the fertility of birds of prey.

● Their natural habitat is farmland with hedgerows, hedges, coniferous and mixed woodland. But they can also be found in gardens.

- They feed on small birds, including: sparrows, starlings, thrushes and chaffinch, but will also eat mice, voles and young rabbits and some insects.

● They are sexually dimorphic: females being twice the size of males. Males weigh 100 - 200 grams and have short, rounded wings, a long tail with dark grey upper parts and reddish barred underparts. Females weigh 180 - 350 grams and have longer, rounded wings, grey brown plumage, brown bars on the

underparts and a white stripe behind the eye.

● They hunt from the air, the long tail acting as a rudder, but they do not hover like kestrels relying on speed and surprise to catch their prey.

● They have short wingspans to help manoeuvrability when flying between trees.

● They have long legs, large sharp talons and a sharp hooked beak for piercing, plucking and tearing up prey and they can carry prey as heavy as themselves.

● They are solitary birds and only come together to breed. Four to six blue/white eggs, speckled with brown, are laid, which hatch in 35 days.

● Nestlings are fed on two to three small birds each day for three weeks to a month, before leaving the nest.