Care of Starving Snowy Owls John Polson 306-221-4569

A bit of background. I was a practising falconer for 30 years beginning when I was thirteen. I owned and managed a small zoo for a couple of years and received all the injured wildlife from the DNR in the southern Okanagan area. I have also been a wildlife biologist since the early 1970's. I have rehabilitated numerous raptors that people have left in my care and this includes quite a few starving birds of prey.

The protocol I suggest is this.

Once a bird is received it should be determined whether it is male or female, adult or juvenile. This is very easily done with Snowy Owls. The males are virtually all white and the females have varying degrees of colour stripes or patches. If the stripes are brown the bird is this year's young i.e. a juvenile. If the stripes or patches are black it is an adult. Males often have a bit of streaking on the top of the head, brown colour equals juvenile, black equals adult.

The examination of the bird should take less than a minute and should be done in a quiet place with a minimum of people. The veterinarian examing room is not a particularly suitable place. It is bright and not at all subdued. If the bird is in the last stages of starvation very little shock will tip it over the edge and it will die. The examiner need only look to see if there are obvious broken bones, blood, open wounds, etc. At the same time the level of malnutition can be easily determined by feeling along the breast bone. If it is a healthy adult bird the breast should be a plump wide "U". A healthy juvenile should be more a "V". In instances of extreme starvation the breast may feel like a convexed "V". Certainly a very shap breast bone with little meat tells you it is in starvation mode. If you want to weigh the bird – it is nice for a before and after recovery assessment, simply weigh the box/kennel or container in which the bird arrived before and after the owl is removed

My recommendation for accomodation is to put the bird in either a darkened kennel in the quietest location of the vet establishment or in a room where the light can be controled. As soon as it is placed here all efforts to save the bird should happen at this site. No moving from one area to another to feed it. If a separate room with controlled lighting is available, this is preferable. It is also very helpful to have a wide padded shelf available in the room at a comfortable level to feed the bird rather than stooping over it each time you enter the room. There has been talk of keeping the bird cooler than room temperature. This is likely preferable but only after it begins to recover. A starving bird will have some trouble keeping its core body temperature up.

<u>Feeding the bird.</u> In instances of extreme starvation, the bird will not eat on its own. Raptors seldom drink and there is little use leaving a dish of water. When a raptor is in good condition, or coming back, at some point it may like to take a bath so a tub of water can be provided later. The bird should be fed often (ever few hours to start) with small pieces of meat half the size of your thumb. The best meats would be duck or pigeon breast, venison or if no wild meat is available, liver or heart. The meat is dipped in warm water and you simply open the beak and push it down it's throat. About 1-2 tablespoons to start. Then leave it in a darkened environment. The idea is to just get it digesting small amounts of meat to get its systedown from the side of the beak.

The keys to remember are: 1) keep the bird quiet with as little stress as possible: 2) initially do not feed it large amounts of food (it will often regurgitate if you do) and 3) the food should be pure meat, no roughage to start. As the bird becomes more responsive likely in 3-4 day, you can leave some strips of meat on top of its feet to stimulate it to feed on its own. As soon as the owl is eating on its own, you can also add some natural prey such as mice along with the red meat.

If the bird is at all responsive when you receive it, it has been my experience that if I do not stress the bird, feed small amounts of quality food, and do not initially over feed it the chances of a starving raptor pulling through should be over 70%. If it is still on its feet and a bit active when received the chances should be close to 100% unless there is some other complication.