

CROW Case Of The Week:

# Common Nighthawk

by Emilie Alfino

A tiny nighthawk arrived at CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) on May 16 with no history but with a very guarded prognosis. Weighing only 7 ½ grams, the bird was cool, quiet and a little dehydrated. His body was in fair condition but his very small size was working against him.



Common Nighthawk

“He could have been abandoned or orphaned but more likely he had been abducted by well-meaning people who thought he was without a mom,” said Wildlife Rehabilitator Robin Bast. “People mean well and they’re trying to do the right thing, but the best thing to do is to call us so we can assess the situation.”

The CROW staff decided to try hand-raising him. They gave him some fluids orally and offered him food – meal worms and crickets in soaked cat chow – but it took him a while to get the hang of eating. Eating at CROW must have been a strange experience for the little guy. In the wild, nighthawks fly around with their mouths open wide and catch bugs. “We can’t mimic that very easily here,” Bast said. “That’s why it’s a challenge raising birds; you can’t mimic the wild.”

CROW staff went to extraordinary lengths to ensure the little bird could be returned to the wild. “You have to feed them in such a way that they don’t imprint on humans,” said Bast. “We would feed him pieces of food on the edge of a hemostat (a surgical tool, essentially long forceps) while hiding ourselves behind a towel so he couldn’t see us but saw only the food. We had a mirror in his cage, too, so he could see himself eating instead of seeing us.”

These complicated but necessary methods of care are further proof that it’s not a good idea for anybody to raise baby wild animals – especially birds.

On June 15, someone observed the bird making short flights in his small wooden cage on CROW’s porch. “He had been inside in the incubator for a while so we’d moved him to a cage. In July he was moved outside to one of our aviaries,” Bast said.

Once in the aviary, he started to have issues eating on his own; Bast decided to keep him there a bit longer so he could develop adequate strength in his flight muscles.

But a wrench was thrown in the plans by a red belly woodpecker. In September staff noticed the nighthawk had a scab-like lesion on top of his head. A mystery at first, they determined his cage companion, a red belly woodpecker, was the cause. “The woodpecker apparently decided not to get along with him, so we separated them,” said Bast. Two days of antibiotic cream did the trick and the growing bird was able to go back outside.

The nighthawk was released on Sanibel October 9 weighing 64 grams, almost 10 times his body weight on arrival. “We released him on the island because naturalists and bird watchers told us the nighthawks were migrating through at that time,” Bast explained. “Hopefully he can join up with one of them and his instincts will kick in.”

CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.) is a nonprofit wildlife hospital providing veterinary care for native

and migratory wildlife from the Gulf Coast of Florida. The hospital accepts patients seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mail donations to PO Box 150, Sanibel, FL 33957. Visit [www.crowclinic.org](http://www.crowclinic.org) or call 472-3644.✧

