



**Critters in Our Midst:  
Helping Wild Birds**  
by Carol Ellis

Red Shouldered Hawk perched in the sun just outside a tree-filled area in my yard.

At a recent "Luck of the Irish" event at Ocean Reef, two very lucky rehabilitated Red Shouldered Hawks (*Buteo lineatus*) were featured as they were returned to the wild by the Florida Keys Wild Bird Center (FKWBC), who made the rescue and eventual release possible.

The release took place in a relatively natural area, from a dock close to the mangroves. Before the release Erin Allison, Executive Director of the FKWBC, gave a brief history of both hawks. One had been at the center for nearly five months, being treated for damaged feathers, head trauma, a yeast infection and conditioning for flight. The second hawk came in about two months ago after a suspected car hit. It had severe head trauma, couldn't stand and exhibited neurological symptoms. The initial head swelling was quick to resolve, but it took about a month to regain its ability to fly.

**Ready - Set - Not so Fast!** The first hawk was slow to figure out what was happening, but within seconds it flew out like a dart! The second hawk was to be "toss-released" - where the bird is taken out of the enclosure and tossed into the

sky. But the hawk had other ideas, as it unexpectedly flew out between the legs of Bayleigh MacHaffie, Operations Director. Both releases were celebrated by oohs, aahs and applause from the crowd of approximately 40 persons.

"Keep Them Flying" is the motto of the FKWBC and their mission is to rescue, rehabilitate and release wild birds. Their bird sanctuary in Tavernier (93600 Overseas Highway) is open to the public Monday to Sunday, from sunrise to sunset. It is a beautiful spot in a mangrove forest, where visitors may walk on a boardwalk and view 40 non-releasable birds— those that due to their condition cannot safely return to nature.

These hawks got a second chance... others are not so lucky. Habitat loss, scarcity of food and places to raise their young, as well as dangerous obstacles take a terrible toll on bird populations.

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS), as of 2017 the top causes of bird mortality: collision with building glass (600 million), collision with vehicles (215 million), poison (72 million),



Red Shouldered Hawk in transport cage. Bayleigh MacHaffie, FKWBC Operations Director with the first of two hawks set to be released to the wild on this day.



"Ready to Go!" Reluctant at first, the hawk had to figure out what was happening. Then within seconds it flew off toward the mangroves.

collision with electrical lines (25.5 million), collision with communication towers (6.6 million), electrocutions (5.6 million) and cats (2.4 billion).

**If you find an orphaned or injured bird, what should you do?**

The first thing is to call the FKWBC. Bird Emergency Hotline (305) 852 - 4486 ext. 1 They will guide you on the phone, and walk you through the situation. The best thing to do is to safely contain an injured bird with a towel or a blanket, place it inside a warm, dark crate or box, and bring it to the FKWBC. If the bird is on the road in an unsafe place such as a bridge, the FKWBC works with local law enforcement to make sure everyone involved is safe. The FKWBC admits birds into their hospital 24/7 and has a staff member on call to respond to new intakes after hours. There is an after-hours drop box (sunset to sunrise) at the hospital, so anyone can bring in a bird at any time. Instructions are to text/call the FKWBC

**Helping Wild Birds... CONTINUED**



Nearly 40 onlookers of all ages came out to witness the release, learn about the injuries and rehabilitation of the two hawks. The Florida Keys Wild Bird Center's mission is to rescue, rehabilitate and release injured or orphaned birds.



The second hawk was "On a Mission!" Though a "toss-release" (where the bird is taken out of the enclosure and tossed into the sky) was planned, the hawk unexpectedly flew out between Bayleigh's legs!

once you've dropped off the bird, and they will respond immediately to intake and start treatment.

If you are unable to contain the bird, they ask that you to keep eyes on the bird until they can get there to rescue it. Every situation is unique, but they do what is best for the bird. If someone has a contained bird from Ocean Reef, the FKWBC will meet them at the front gate or at the Circle K in Key Largo. They also work with Everglades Outpost in Homestead, which has a drop-off spot for injured birds found on the mainland.

In 2016 I witnessed the rescue of a baby Red Shouldered hawk that fell out of its



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nest, high in a mature Gumbo Limbo tree in my neighbors yard. The FKWBC responded, and enlisted the help of the Florida Keys Electric Coop (FKEC). Once the bird was checked out, and found to be uninjured, the FKEC worker in the bucket truck returned the bird to its nest.

Here we are in 2025. Red Shouldered Hawks are frequently seen in my yard, however, the pictured hawk nest in the Gumbo Limbo tree next door ... is gone. The homeowner took down the trees, preferring a grass lawn instead.

It is curious that we hear a lot about the loss of tropical forests in countries far from our shores, but remember... the Florida Keys is also a unique habitat with tropical forests... located right here, which also needs our protection. We must preserve native habitat, and rehabilitate our developed spaces with wildlife-friendly plants wherever possible.

There are simply not enough native plants left in the "wild"... that is, not enough undisturbed habitat remaining in the Florida Keys, to support the diversity of wildlife we would like to see survive.

A healthy earth full of a diversity of species takes more than luck. It takes people, dedication and effort. We are lucky to have the FKWBC in our community.

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www.keepthemflying.org  
305-852-4486

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The Florida Keys Electric Coop (FKEC) and the Wild Bird Center teamed up on this 2016 rescue. Bernie Lietaert (no longer with FKEC), Isaiah Leake, two FKWBC employees/ interns, Sara Hamilton, Lance Good (no longer with FKEC), and FKEC Right of Way Crew Leader Marcus Martin.



The rescue effort was made possible utilizing the FKEC bucket truck. The man in the bucket is Isaiah Leake.



The baby Red Shouldered Hawk sits beside its parent after being rescued from its fall to the ground.