

PRINCIPLES OF RAPTOR CAGE DESIGN

Adjustments in construction listed as 2.0

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INTRODUCTION

The goal when building a cage for raptors in rehabilitation is to prepare a structure in which to train raptors for successful release back to the wild, after an injury, or as a former orphan, all in the shortest possible amount of time and with limited handling. Preparing a bird for release includes capturing a feeling of the outdoors inside a cage and reducing the stress of captivity by providing choices. Choices should include shade or sun; perch, post, or platform; nest boxes; low, medium, and high perches; sufficient room to exercise; and for raptors, the opportunity to capture live prey—all while keeping the occupants safe is the way to ultimately achieve the goal of release.

PRECONSTRUCTION PLANNING: When planning cage construction, one needs to think about where to place the cage, as well as the exterior and interior design. Design the cage to be as versatile as possible by incorporating holding areas, prerelease training, and adequate flight space for species both large and small.

Placement Provide a view of the natural world. Build a cage for all seasons. What does the cage site look like year round. Cages totally shaded are not good for either the cage or the birds.

Predators One of the goals of a successful cage is to keep the birds safe inside by keeping predators out. Know what predators are located in your area and learn their natural history as well. Are they diggers or climbers? What is the smallest space they need to gain entry? Be sure to include domestic animals such as dogs and cats on your list of predators.

CAGE MATERIALS: Walls, Roof, and Substrate

Wire and birds are not a good mix, but wire is sometimes necessary to keep predators out. Wooden 1" x 4" slats makes for a good visual barrier but can darken a cage if used both on the sides and the roof. Check out hardware stores for new materials you might be able to use. **2.0** TreeHouse discovered weasels after moving to our new location -- unfortunately it was after we had already utilized slats on the raptor complex exterior. Even though we had poured a concrete footing, we then had to wrap the entire complex in hardware cloth to keep weasels from entering. The slats positioned on the interior perimeter walls assists in keeping the birds inside from having direct contact with the wire.

TreeHouse uses white plastic lattice on the roof, combined with wire (on the outside), instead of slats in certain areas to provide more light. Learn how to combine construction materials to keep the birds both safe and healthy. **2.0** The plastic lattice is working well but needs to be installed correctly. To avoid causing the lattice to bind up and crack when it expands and contracts with the weather, the lattice will need to "float" by not securing the lattice too tightly to the frames. Also use "privacy" lattice due to the fact that the holes in privacy lattice are smaller so that barred owls cannot escape.

Don't forget to include the "floor" of the cage in providing protection for the birds from digging predators. TreeHouse uses vinyl coated welded wire covered with a substrate material. **2.0** Use Meramec rock as substrate. Drainage is good and the rounded edges are more forgiving than gravel on raptor feet.

Restrict the number of entryways from the outside and use double door entries into the cage to help eliminate birds escaping.

Interior Cage furniture should be added to match the needs and recovery phase of birds in rehabilitation. Research the natural history of bird species in order to become familiar with and provide appropriate furniture, such as nest boxes, appropriate size and type of perches, and hiding areas for the birds. Make sure there are daylight and shaded areas available.

CAGING TYPES: Rehabilitation for raptors can be divided into three main areas—each needing a specific type of cage interior.

Holding areas provide an injured raptor with a next step after recovering from their injury in an indoor cage. This is where they take the time to recover and start the process of building up their bodies, and re-acclimating to the weather.

Hunt Training Young raptors rely on their parents as backup when learning how to hunt. The rehabilitators' job is to prepare orphans for life in the wild by providing a place for them to learn how to hunt live prey. The main ingredient needed in the cage at this time is a contained area scattered with leaf litter where live prey can hide, but cannot escape, giving young birds the opportunity to practice and perfect their hunting skills.

TreeHouse also receives injured adult raptors who may have sustained head, eye, or ear damage. To ensure all senses are functioning properly after apparent recovery these birds are also tested with live prey.

Pre-release Flight Conditioning The last stage of rehabilitation is flight training and conditioning to increase stamina and muscle mass. The longer the flight path, the better it is for the bird. The best use of this space is when perches are only available at each end of the flight path, negating the bird flying only short hops from perch to perch.

TREEHOUSE WILDLIFE CENTER'S RAPTOR REHABILITATION COMPLEX

Separate cages may be constructed to house birds in each of these three areas (holding, hunt training, and flight conditioning), or the three different caging areas can be incorporated into one multipurpose cage as was done at TreeHouse.

The more diversity built into a cage, the quicker one is able to shepherd the birds through the rehabilitation process. TreeHouse built versatility into the cages starting in the 1990s, using sliding doors such as those found in barns. Sliding door hardware is inexpensive and can be easily used to convert a holding cage into a release–training cage, or to convert a large flight cage into several smaller flight cages.

In 2013 TreeHouse combined all three areas of rehabilitation under one 5,760 square foot roof, providing 14-12'x12' holding cages for medium and large birds, 4-6'x12' holding cages for screech owls and kestrels. Holding cages can open up into 16-12x24' releasing training areas. Flight space can increase in 12' intervals up to 224' incorporating four 90 degree turns. **2.0** Our large holding cages cannot support sliding doors so we've installed swinging doors into those cages which can sometimes become too large, and therefore sag. When entering holding cage areas these doors can allow for escape into the release training and flight areas. Installing dutch doors should remedy that issue.