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A Quarterly Newsletter

Issue 41, Sept 2010

Adventures in China - my visit to the Beijing Raptor Rescue Center by Laurel Degemes

I had the good fortune of being a faculty leader for a group of veterinary students from NCSU College of Veterinary Medicine who attended a 2 week veterinary acupuncture course at Zhejiang University in Hangzhou, China (SE China, south of Shanghai) in May, 2010. Following completion of that course, the students returned to the US and I flew to Beijing for an additional few days to visit the Beijing Raptor Rescue Center (BRRC) and provide training for their staff and veterinarian. BRRC is one of the conservation projects coordinated by the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) and was formed approximately 9 years ago (FMI – <http://www.brrc.org.cn/brrceng/index.html>). The following notes are from my trip journal, and will perhaps shed some light on the challenges facing Chinese raptor rehabilitators (although, this article is not just about raptors, of course!).

Sunday, May 23, 2010

I arrived in Beijing yesterday and visited the raptor center briefly, then went out to eat with a couple of staff and volunteers before getting settled in to the hotel for the evening.



Dr. Laurie examining Eurasian eagle owl with staff & Dr. Kati (photo by Crane Zhang)

Walked to BRRRC, lugging the textbooks that I brought to give them – am happy to unload them finally! I was sweating by the time that I got there due to the humidity. The same staff is here as during a previous visit in May, 2008 – Steele, Gavin, Linda (a Chinese-trained veterinarian), and Crane, and their English has improved – mostly because they need to speak in English with the US veterinarian, Dr. Kati Loeffler. Kati joined the staff about 15 months ago, and I met her briefly when she spent a month of intensive training at Carolina Raptor Center in fall 2008 (she received her DVM and PhD from Michigan State Univ.). Kati has converted their records system to English too. I went through a number of their current clinical cases with them, and gave them input on treatment, prognosis, etc. – an adult Eurasian eagle owl (*Bubo bubo*) that had been put in a cage by a farmer after he caught it preying on his chickens. The owl had a couple talons on each foot partially amputated, and had bad abrasions on both wrists and its cere (the fleshy part above the beak) – will take some time for the talons to heal, as well as the abrasions, but should be releasable. Another Eurasian eagle owl seemed to have a painful carpal joint upon extension, but we could not see any abnormalities on exam or radiographs – we will test fly her tomorrow. They also had a fledgling eagle owlet that is doing well – they picked off a number of small ticks around the eyes, and treated it with ivermectin. A Japanese sparrow hawk (*Accipiter gularis*, slightly larger than a sharp shinned hawk, but smaller than a Coopers hawk) was examined and blood collected – he will need his tail “imped” – a process that involves gluing in replacement feathers using a small bamboo splint and 5-min epoxy. Then looked at a juvenile tawny owl (*Strix aluco*) that was very interesting bird – smaller than a barred owl (was about 425 g – almost fledged weight now) and very pretty. A common buzzard (*Buteo buteo*, closely related to our red-tailed hawk) was examined for mild bumblefoot, and had both sets of primary feathers cut off, so they are in the process of molting (this was a bird that was confiscated from a private citizen who tried to keep it as a pet, thus the clipped feathers). We also looked at a little owl (*Athene noctua*, related to our burrowing owls) that had been caught in a glue trap – they had removed the sticky glue using mineral oil, but will still need to do some more washing to get residual oil off the bird. Otherwise, seems to be doing well and should be releasable soon.

They ordered lunch for me – spicy(!) chicken with vegetables over rice. Way too much to eat for lunch, and a bit on the spicy side for my tastes! After lunch, we started wet lab practice – they each had a different thawed cadaver of various sizes (common buzzard, gray-faced buzzard [*Butastur indicus*, similar in size to our broad winged hawk], Japanese sparrow hawk, Amur falcon [*Falco amurensis*, about American kestrel size with brilliant orange legs, beak, and periorbital skin, and black and gray plumage], and long eared owl [*Asio otus* – this is the same species as in North America]).



BRRRC staff learning feather imping techniques (photo by Crane Zhang)

We practiced imping techniques (using locally obtained bamboo, of course(!), as well as feather shafts). Also practiced intraosseous catheter placement and airsac cannulation. They were all very enthusiastic and appreciative of the opportunities to learn new skills, especially imping! They have several candidates for this procedure – they had read about it, but had not tried it yet, so practicing the technique on cadavers will give them the skill and confidence to try this on their cases. They also learned how to save feathers for their “feather bank” for future imping needs, something that they had not thought to do before now.

This leads to the section on challenges faced by wildlife rehabilitators in China. For one thing, wildlife rehabilitation is not widely practiced in the country. While I don't know the overall numbers, in Beijing, BRRRC is the only center devoted to raptor rehabilitation, and there is one other government run center that does wildlife rehabilitation for all wildlife species (I have not visited this center and cannot comment on the level of skill that they have). There is at least one other raptor rehabilitation center in Hong Kong, but that might be it for raptor centers (and keep in mind that China's population is about 3 billion...). While BRRRC has been established for nearly 9 years, they are still on the steep part of their learning curve – prior to Dr. Kati's arrival in spring 2009, they had limited opportunities to receive training from outside experts or attend conferences. Furthermore, they had and continue to have very limited to almost non-existent options for in-country consultation assistance from other experts (since there are so few wildlife experts in China, apparently).

When I asked them about the types of cases they see, there are certainly some similarities to what we would see here in the US – orphans (both true orphans and so-called orphans!), trauma (HBC, cat attacks, window strikes, etc.), and juvenile “starvation” cases, for example. Perhaps they get more toxin/pesticide cases, but these are difficult to definitively diagnose without access to appropriate diagnostics (they are working on this). However, the biggest difference is with the types of cases that are confiscated from the public or are released from captivity and then found and submitted to the center. They had a group of five common kestrels (*Falco tinnunculus* – this small falcon is about the size of our merlins) in one flight cage that had all been in captivity for a period of time – all had various levels of wing trims or damaged flight and tail feathers from inappropriate caging and some had blunted/dulled talons as well (necessitating waiting for talons to grow out, new feathers to molt, or replacement of damaged feathers by imping). This species of bird commonly nests on buildings in Beijing, and culturally, it was a common practice to take a young bird from the nest and make a pet out of it. While this practice is now outlawed in the country, enforcement is sporadic, and of course, it still happens frequently. Raptors determined to be psychologically imprinted are usually euthanized, but the rest are rehabilitated for release. And then there are the challenges associated with limited space for large flight cages and appropriate open areas for creance flight training, to get these birds physically able to be released. BRRRC has a number of flight cages and their facilities are quite good, considering everything, but the cages are still not adequate for flight training for most species.



Creance flying a Common kestrel on Beijing Normal University campus (note blue sky – an anomaly in Beijing!!!) (photo by Crane Zhang)

In spite of these and many other challenges and frustrations, BRRC is making progress, and every day, they make a difference for the raptors of Beijing, through rehabilitation and public education/outreach efforts! I can really see a HUGE difference in the quality of medicine and rehabilitation that is practiced here since my previous visit 2 years ago – the facilities have been expanded and renovated to provide better spaces for anesthesia and surgery, necropsy, quarantine/isolation area with separate resources to manage birds in that area (due to potential infectious diseases, such as Newcastle Disease virus). They now have 2 anesthesia machines (they did not have the ability to do anesthesia the last time, much less surgery), improved radiology facilities (including improved safety standards for people), etc. Also, they are much more efficient in treating their cases – skilled, focused, organized, and speedy. Kati has made a big difference in the ~15 months that she has been here, although she is frustrated that she can't do more, and faster.

I stayed at the center until nearly 7 pm, then walked back to the hotel and had dinner in the restaurant in the hotel. Fortunately, the menu had an English translation for the Chinese menu, but unfortunately, I thought I ordered a vegetarian dish with potatoes, squash, and eggplant (pointing to the English on the menu)... and what I received was entirely different – fried green beans (actually quite good, and better than it sounds) with thin sliced mini potatoes, LOTS of red chilies (therefore, quite spicy!), and some kind of meat in very tiny pieces, that I could not really identify – maybe chicken? It was tasty, but a bit too spicy for my palate, so next time, I'll be more specific about less spice – the waiter in the restaurant speaks some English, so we'll see...

Monday, May 24, 2010

I had the windows open over night, and it was quite breezy and relatively cooler with lower humidity this morning. And guess what – the sky was actually BLUE over Beijing today!! Never thought I'd see that phenomenon – my experience on a former trip in May 2008 and again this trip, is that the sky is typically a hazy grey from so much air pollution. In fact, the last time I visited, one of the Chinese college students asked me if the sky in the US was truly blue in color – makes one appreciate our (relatively) clean air! Overall, a pretty nice day today, so I am hoping for more of the same tomorrow when I go to visit The Great Wall and do some birding tomorrow.



Creance flying Eurasian eagle owl on Beijing Normal University campus (photo by Crane Zhang)

Had breakfast at the hotel and walked over to BRRC by 9 am. The first thing this morning was to test fly a Eurasian eagle owl and a common kestrel using a creance system (this is a method of exercising birds on a rope or line that is attached to jesses [straps] attached to their legs). The space we had to do this was behind their center in a small patch of garden space next to some green houses – about the size of 2 typical suburban house lots. This was another one of those skills that they had read about, but had not actually tried (I showed them a video from NCSU, but otherwise, they had only read about it in books) – they were very well-prepared with nicely made jesses and creance systems – 5 mm rope for the owl and light line with a short fishing pole and reel for the kestrel. Both birds flew well, and it allowed them a chance to see how to do this – next time, they will see if they can negotiate permission to fly birds on the soccer field on campus, but they will have to work through university channels to do that. Otherwise, it could be a 90 min drive to a location outside of Beijing that would be suitable for creance flying – not a very practical solution for frequent exercise programs! Probably for short test flights, the space we used this morning will work out OK. One of the staff, Crane, took some fabulous photos that allowed us to assess wing symmetry and extension, which we were especially interested in seeing in the owl (that seemed painful when we extended her carpal joints yesterday, but could not find any problems on radiographs).

A new patient came in late morning – a tawny owlet, about 3-4 weeks old. No apparent problems other than dehydration (it was found by a worker, apparently fallen out of its nest – maybe due to the strong winds last night?). I spent additional time going through some hematology slides and radiographs with Kati and staff – they have a pretty good handle on those areas, but could use a bit of additional perspective. After lunch, we started some orthopedic surgery practice for Kati and Linda, using cadavers. We did some basic things like ulna and radius fracture repairs, then more complicated surgery, such as humerus fracture repair.

Left a little earlier than yesterday, probably about 6:30 pm. Dinner at the hotel restaurant was another adventure, although this time, not spicy, just bitter. I asked the waiter (with very limited English skills, as it turns out) about a beef dish that was not spicy – he finally understood that I meant red chili peppers when he brought out a bowl of them from the kitchen. I ordered a beef dish with green peppers and lettuce (I know, it sounds weird) – it was not spicy, but had some other type of vegetable that was green, thinly sliced, rough/irregular texture on surface, and bitter-tasting. I have no idea what that was, but otherwise, the meal was very tasty, and better than last night's. Looking over the menu, I inadvertently ordered “dry bean pot” last night (the item below the one that I thought I was ordering...). I decided against the “dry pot intestine” and “slick intestine” menu items – something tells me that those would be even stranger than the unidentified green, bitter vegetable in tonight's meal... I suspect that the English translation leaves something to the imagination (it certainly conjures up interesting mental pictures of some dishes!).

Tuesday, May 25, 2010



Hiking up the “Great Wall” of China – what a great workout! (photo by Linda LiYing)

Today was a “play day” – I had asked for assistance in arranging a trip to the Great Wall, with some birding in the area. Linda (from BRRC) arranged for her friend Amy, to pick us up at 8 am at my hotel. The trip out of the city was a bit slow, but we got to the Juyongguan section of the Great Wall (about 50 km north of Beijing) by mid morning. There were quite a few people there, but not as busy as it would have been on the weekend. We were in a mountainous area with lots of trees (not very tall, and most areas looked like they had been planted, with trees in rows). We hiked up the section on the west side of the highway – there were bridges over the highway to facilitate this – I kept looking over to the east side that seemed to be less crowded (!). The walk up the stairs was steep at times, with large steps the height of my knees but some steps only 3-4” high. There were places along the way that were “guard houses” that provided views and shade and we took advantage of those. It was sunny and warm, but not scorching – maybe low 80s. Also along the way were small businesses at scattered locations – in case you just had to buy a souvenir to haul around – we did get some ice cream, which was great! After we passed the ~half way point, the number of people thinned out, so it did not seem as crowded. When we got to the top, we took pictures (along with lots of Chinese tourists) and ate lunch. Amy had packed sandwiches and apples for everyone, and I have to say that it was a most unusual sandwich – strawberry jam, peanut butter, fried egg and lettuce on white bread! It tasted great, even though it sounds a bit odd. Our trip down was via a different route that was very uncrowded! There were lots of stretches of very steep downhill steps, so we took it easy to avoid taking a misstep! Linda was a bit afraid of heights, so this part was harder for her. Drive back to Beijing was uneventful. We stopped at a restaurant near Beijing Agricultural Univ. and had dinner – another great variety of foods and some of the best mushrooms! Kati met us there and we drove over to the vet school on campus to meet Dr. Chen – he was one of Linda’s professors with expertise in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) and veterinary acupuncture. I thought it would be a great idea for Kati and Linda to make contact with him for the possibility of incorporating TCM with some of their raptor patients that do not respond well to western medicine treatments (i.e., back-injured birds with paralyzed legs).

Wed. May 26, 2010



What's the easiest way to weigh a 10 kg cinereous vulture? Train it to step up on a platform scale! (photo by Laurel Degernes)

Last day at BRRRC, so I wanted to make sure that we covered everything left on our “to-do” list! Today is the day that they evaluate all of the birds as a group (kind of like their rounds day), so I got to see a number of birds as they were weighed and assessed – 2 Japanese sparrow hawks, an Amur falcon, both tawny owl chicks, common buzzard, 2 saker falcons (*Falco cherrug*), 5 common kestrels, 1 juvenile Eurasian eagle owl (did not look at the 2 adults today, since they were examined 2 days ago), and 3 cinereous vultures (*Aegypius monachus*). The vultures were weighed out in their flight pen – they had been trained to step onto a platform scale (all weigh 9-10 kg – the largest of the Old World vultures!). Then 2 were restrained for assessments of their feet (one had sloughed some talons, possibly due to some type of toxin exposure) and one had a healed ulna fracture. Overall, they looked really good, and with a little more time, are probably releasable. Unfortunately, they do not have a large flight cage suitable to exercise these birds, or a suitable area to creance fly them.

After lunch, we practiced some more orthopedic surgeries, this time on the legs. At the end of the day, I gave everyone t-shirts from WRNC and raptor magnets from CRC, and they gave me a few gifts as well. I spent the evening packing, for a return to the US in the morning (taxi at 4:45 am!!). All in all, a very memorable trip, and great fun to see a variety of new species of raptors and work with a group of very enthusiastic and eager raptor rehabilitators!

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