



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

November 24th, 2023

The Uncommon Common Poorwill

The Common Poorwill is not a bird we see on a regular basis at California Wildlife Center. So far this year we have only received nine of this fascinating species in comparison to some of the other birds, who we might receive in the hundreds. However, what is common is that this bird is often mistaken for a baby owl due to their appearance.

Common Poorwills are a member of the nightjar family, who are all nocturnal. Their bodies are compact and about the size of a dove, and their plumage is shades of browns and grays that camouflage into their wooded surroundings. They nest on the ground and easily blend into fallen foliage. They forage on insects such as moths and beetles that they typically find on the ground, or even leap into the air to catch.

When the weather is cold and their food is not available, this unique bird has an exceptional ability to enter a state similar to hibernation called torpor. During this time they do not fly and stay very still to conserve energy. They control their body temperature to acclimate with weather conditions and to avoid hypothermia and starvation. In addition to a lowered body temperature, their heart rate also drops, breathing is slower, and their metabolism is decreased to go into this natural survival mode that can last for weeks.

When Poorwills are in torpor, sometimes finders think they need help – a reasonable assumption as they are not moving and on the ground. If they are cold to the touch, it's possible they are in this state. Always contact a wildlife rehabilitation center if a Poorwill is found on the ground. Rehabilitators will be able to assess the situation and determine if the animal needs to be brought into care. Such was the case for a patient we received last week. A rescuer brought in the bird, and after our staff thoroughly examined and ran some tests, they found that the Poorwill was in good health and able to be returned to the rescue site.

Another Common Poorwill we received late last month was brought to us from a local animal control center. While this adult male was in torpor, he was also in need of help. He was severely dehydrated, emaciated, lethargic and depressed, all of which the technicians suspect was due to lack of



Rescued Common Poorwill.



Patient in enclosure for rehabilitation.



Common Poorwill back in the wild.



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food. Our technicians found all testing results for disease to be negative and nothing more of concern. Over the next couple of days inside our warm hospital, he came out of torpor and was alert. Other positive signs noted were that he was vocal, swaying, and fluffing his feathers. Providing water and nutrition, technicians found his appetite was good and he began gaining weight. He was moved to an outdoor aviary during the day, and our staff established that he was well-flighted. After 15 days in care, he was finally released back into his habitat.

If you come across a Common Poorwill and unsure if the bird is in need of assistance, please call California Wildlife Center or your local rescue center and we will advise the best steps to take. You can do even more to help our local wildlife by donating at cawildlife.org.