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## Grounded hawks take flight in Yolo, thanks to group

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Four hawks soared to freedom in the sky above Yolo County on Sunday morning.

At first, no one watching said a word when the Swainson's hawks were released at Babel Slough, near South River Road south of West Sacramento. Everyone waited until all of them – including the one with the damaged tail – safely flew away.

Finally, one of the bird-watchers spoke up.

"That was great. That is how they're supposed to look," said Kevin McRae, the master falconer who released the birds.

If all goes well, the birds will join the other migrating hawks and head south for the winter.

Their future didn't look so bright a few months ago. The birds, a threatened California species, were found in the Sacramento area in July before they knew how to fly. Since then, they have been treated and rehabilitated, including exercise in a flight chamber.

"The goal is to get them prepared for their natural lifestyle," said Judith Lamare, president of Friends of the Swainson's Hawk.

The hawks are typically 20 inches long, with a wingspan of 4 feet, and weigh about 2 pounds. They return to the Sacramento area every year, primarily to reproduce. They nest in large trees, often near agricultural fields. In recent years, urban sprawl has threatened their habitats, according to bird advocates. Young birds can become injured when they fall out of their nests.

That's what may have happened to the four birds – one adult, three juveniles – released Sunday. All of them had been cared for by the California Foundation for Birds of Prey, which treats injured or sick raptors. So far, the organization has helped 220 birds this year.

Returning them to the natural habitat is the goal, which is why, on a clear, sunny morning, the hawks were released at Babel Slough, a well-known roosting site for the birds in September.

"If we didn't get them out now, they won't be able to follow the herd," McRae said.

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