"Drake Hotel."

During a recent tour of her facilities, one female cardinal recuperated in the adult song bird aviary while two Red-tailed Hawks and a kestrel sat in the raptor facilities.

In the house, Kane had more birds - "We wouldn't want to run out of birds" - a Blue Jay, screech owl, a Bay-breasted Warbler and a Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. The warbler was recuperating from a back injury. "He probably flew into a window," said Kane. The sapsucker was being treated for what Kane calls "sapsucker syndrome. Everything works but he can't stand up and fly".

Meanwhile, the owl stared sternly from its perch in what used to be the front porch and the Blue Jay cocked its head, studying a visitor. Kane said the Blue Jay's infamous reputation is undeserved. "They're entertaining, they're funny," she said. "Smack in the middle of the busiest time of the year they make me laugh."

Kane said her birding experiences - from observing the common Blue Jays to the rare Peregrine Falcons - have helped her care for injured birds. She knows what a bird faces in the wild, and that helps her determine whether what she does as a rehabber will help or thwart the bird's ability to survive once it is released.

But she also "had to have a whole different set of knowledge to be a rehabber. It's much more than recognizing a bird and its song." A local veterinarian has agreed to work with the Bird Lady, although his only background on birds was a three-hour course on poultry at veterinarian school. "We got an ornithology text and went from there," said Kane.

"He took the time to teach me some things I would have never researched. He does all the surgery and prescribes the medication."

To be a bird rehabber requires intimate daily contact. The metabolic rate for birds is three times that of mammals. Kane said she can not fail to recognize even the smallest clue, such as a bird not eating at one scheduled feeding.

Kane must also recognize when or whether a bird can be returned to the wild. Sometimes, they never are. For instance, she has not been able to release the Red-tailed Hawk. It was likely injured and lived among humans during its imprinting period, said Kane. At that time, a bird learns to associate with those with whom it is most familiar. The hawk came to think of itself as a human. As it recovered, the bird became able to survive in the wild. But the trouble would come during the mating season. The bird would select a human as a mate. One human only. Should any other human enter what the hawk considered its territory, the hawk would be compelled to defend the human.

That is why Kane so strongly lectures on imprinting. "To take a just-hatched bird and raise it all by yourself is not a kindness," said Kane. "You impede it for the rest of its life."

"Eighty percent of all birds hatched in a year die in their first year. Half of the rest will die by the time they are two. It's very unlikely that an improperly imprinted bird will survive to sexual maturity," said Kane.

Her philosophizing ended as a couple walked toward her carrying a young mallard, a recent patient. A few days before Kane had taken the duck and its siblings to the couple's farm pond near Wayne, thirty miles south of Woodstock. But the couple noticed one of the ducks was cold and shivering.

Nestling the young duck against her stomach with one hand, Kane gently ran her fingers through its feathers. They seemed to lack oil which protects the duck from the cold and the dampness. Kane checked its preening gland which produces the oil. "He's got oil," she said, then checked its mouth. "The mouth is a little pale. Maybe I'll run a test to see if you have parasites," she said to the patient. The man and woman nodded and left, assured the duck was in skilled and compassionate hands. ■

Andrea Kane patched the wing of this injured White-breasted Nuthatch. Photo by Paul Dawson.