

BETWEEN THE LINES

Raptor lady teaches people about birds of prey

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MILTON

When lightning struck a young peregrine falcon, Dianne Moller stepped up to help. She kept the badly hurt bird in a sterile cage for weeks until its burned feet healed. Eventually, the peregrine named Catelyn was able to stand and perch. Normally, peregrines are powerful and fast flying. But the bird has permanent nerve damage in one wing and will never fly well enough to return to the wild. Today, Catelyn is one of eight educational birds that Moller cares for at Hoo's Woods, a raptor education and rehabilitation center outside of Milton.

Live birds are highlights of Moller's programs to teach people about birds of prey and the environment.

"They provide a close encounter with nature," Moller said. "For many people, seeing the birds has special meaning because they are alive and real."

Her audiences include public and private school kids, Scouts, conservation groups, outdoor-education groups and college instructors.

Earlier this spring, Moller was commended for her work.

The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation named her the Wildlife Conservationist of the Year. She also received a conservation award from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in 2009.

Most people never see raptors as close as when Moller has one perched on her hand. The birds mesmerize their audiences with piercing eyes, colorful feathers and other worldly voices.

When Moller opens the door to her barn, the sounds of wilderness come alive. Deep hoots, long cackles and high trills come from the pens where barred and barn owls, an American kestrel, a merlin and others make their homes.

Moller refers to them as her beloved birds.

They live in captivity because of past injuries or because they imprinted on humans as youngsters and are unafraid of people.

A screech owl named Tommy has only one eye. Shakespeare the rough-legged hawk was shot in the wing. Madelyn the bald eagle got hit by a car.

Some, like an 18-year-old barred owl, have been with her for a long time. One, like Oakley, is fairly new to the winged menagerie. Oakley is a spectacled owl, the largest owl in the Central and South American rain forest, where habitat loss threatens the species.

Not just anyone can care for these wild creatures.

Under federal and state laws, people cannot legally possess birds of prey, unless they are properly licensed and trained like Moller.

She is licensed by both the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources to rehabilitate injured or orphaned raptors. About 40 birds a year come through the center.

“Caring for wildlife is time consuming, expensive and takes continued learning,” said Mandy Kamps, wildlife biologist with the DNR.

Kamps coordinates the wildlife rehabilitation program.

She knows that caring for raptors is not for everyone.

“It can be overwhelming for some people,” Kamps said.

Moller thrives on it.

She founded the nonprofit Hoo’s Woods in 1998 after training with a local wildlife rehabilitator.

“At the time, no one was taking care of raptors,” Moller recalls.

She is not paid for her rehabilitation work.

Instead, Moller relies on donations, grants and fees from about 75 raptor programs a year to pay for upkeep of her center and the care and feeding of the birds. They eat a natural diet of captive-raised rodents and quail.

“It’s important we send a message that we need to care about our environment,” Moller said.

“Birds are barometers that tell us what is going on in nature.”

Allison Halkey has known Moller since 2006, when Halkey became Hoo’s Woods’ official photographer.

“She consistently emphasizes the importance of preserving the world in which we all live by sharing her dedicated message of conservation through environmental education,” Halkey said.

Halkey wrote the comment in her nomination of Moller as conservationist of the year.

Halkey also called Moller a good communicator and “a seasoned expert” in naturalresource conservation.

In Moller’s quest to learn more about raptors, she attended a falconry meeting 15 years ago. Today, Moller is a master falconer, known for flying merlins, one of the most difficult raptors to train because they are fast and easy to lose.

Falconry is the pursuit of wild game with a trained raptor and has been practiced for about 4,000 years.

The activity opened new doors for Moller.

She is chairwoman for the Women’s Working Group of the International Association of Falconry and Conservation of Birds of Prey. She also is serving her sixth year on the board of the North American Falconers Association as Great

Lakes director and public relations officer. In addition, she is only the third woman to serve on the board since it began in 1960.

Moller's love of falconry has taken her overseas.

Officials of the International Falconry Festival in Abu Dhabi of the United Arab Emirates invited her to speak in 2011 and 2014.

Included in her talks were programs about women in falconry and developing educational materials for the classroom.

Caring for raptors is a passion that took root in Moller's childhood.

"My mother loved animals," she said. "We used to go for drives and look for hawks. But there weren't many back then because of DDT in the environment. My mom taught me why it is so important to appreciate nature."

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Einstein, a barn owl, spreads his wings in his habitat at Diane Moller's home in rural Milton. He is one of eight birds that Moller is caring for. The Wisconsin Wildlife Federation has named her the Wildlife Conservationist of the Year.



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Dianne Moller keeps educational birds at her home in rural Milton. Oakley is a spectacled owl, native to Central and South America. Oakley's species is the largest owl in his native area, but loss of habitat is a threat to his kind.⁴