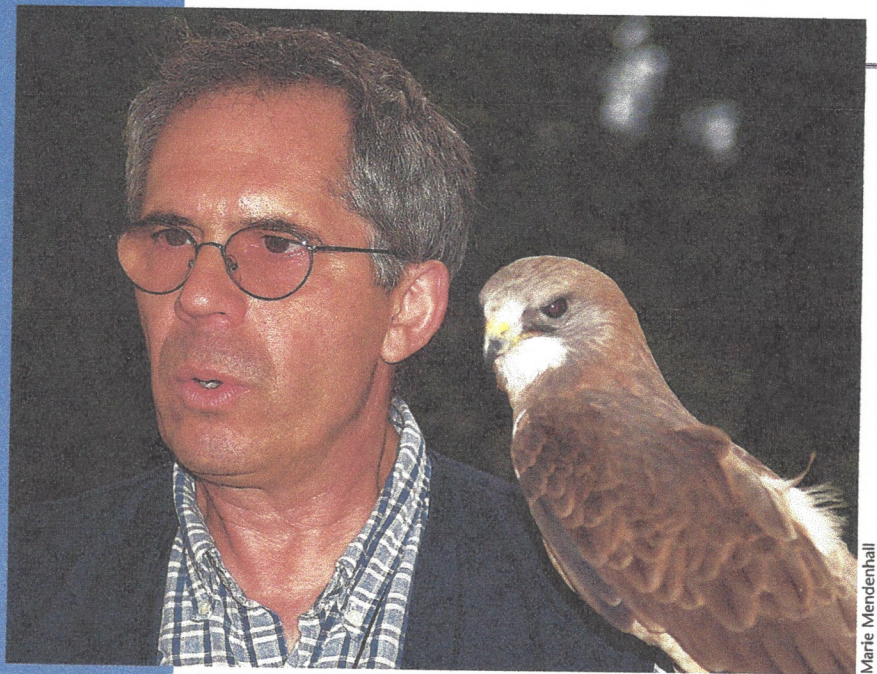


*A relationship
with the
graceful, fast
and deadly
falcon has been
treasured by
humans for
centuries.*



Marie Mendenhall

✦ Tom Donald and his Swainson's hawk, Sultan.

We head out along the winding gravel road at the north edge of Eastend. Halfway up the hill to the new T.rex Discovery Centre, we finally see the sign: North Hill Birds of Prey.

As we drive into the yard we see only the clump of trees and collection of outbuildings that mark a Saskatchewan farm. We make our way beneath the overhanging branches into an enclave of trees, oak barrels full of blossoming flowers, and quaint cottage buildings. Owner-manager Mel Fitch's special homemade brown bread—still warm when we arrive—waits on the kitchen table along with preserves and fresh fruit.

The location allows easy access to the T.rex Discovery Centre, birdwatching in the surrounding Frenchman River Valley, or a tour of the Old Man On His Back Nature Conservancy. But an exclusive wildlife encounter lies right outside the cottage door.

Master falconer Tom Donald, with 40-years' experience with birds of prey, will most likely be found in the tree-lined yard across from the cottages.

*story & photos Marie Mendenhall
additional photos Glen and Rebecca Grambo*

Glen and Rebecca Grambo

Tiered seating rims one end where Donald gives raptor presentations three times a day. He holds a Bachelor of Science in environmental studies from the University of Saskatchewan, and has for many years been involved in sport falconry—hunting with birds of prey, raptor field biology, peregrine falcon captive breeding, and airport bird control. These days he wants to give people the chance to “connect in a real way” to a variety of hawks, falcons, owls and similar birds.

Before people arrive each day, he tethers the birds to perches in the yard. Small leather hoods cover some of their heads. Donald stresses that these are wild birds, and the hoods calm them in the presence of human visitors. During demonstrations, Donald presents individual birds on his gloved fist. He discusses their training and behavior, removing the hoods so we can see their brilliant markings. He also touches on environmental concerns and other aspects of sport falconry.

His own experiences become part of the “wow factor” of these entertaining demonstrations. In 1990, his male peregrine falcon was the first flown in a sky diving experiment to discover the speed of falcons in a vertical dive. This program established falcons as the world’s fastest animal, he says, when one was clocked skydiving at 329 km per hour during an event at San Juan Island in Washington State.

Donald also holds evening demonstrations or “hawk walks” to allow people to see the birds fly. Last year mosquito infestations interfered, and eventually he had to cancel these evening walks. Since that was the first year he had tried offering public demonstrations, he took it as a learning experience.

This year, he has built flight demonstrations into the daily routine. He plans to use tall perches in a nearby field, where the birds will be attached to a long run line. Then he will call each bird to himself, so visitors can get a close look at the birds in flight at every demonstration.

North Hill Cottage is a haven for injured falcons and hawks—a chance at a new life. Trainer Tom Donald says it’s a full time job and it’s all about the birds.



Donald shows a peregrine falcon on his gloved fist. Note the hood, used to keep the birds calm, and the straps or jesses attached to his feet.



The hood is removed from Radar, a young 2-year-old gyrfalcon, one of the few birds which stay with Donald rather than getting released into the wild. Radar loves pigeons and helps Donald with airport control.

All of the demonstrations provide vacationers a chance to examine the hunting birds in unusual proximity. “Ordinarily you see a Swainson’s hawk sitting on a pole or flying in the sky,” Donald says, as an example. “But this way you get to see one up close. You can see all the fine details of the plumage, see something about their personality, and learn about what a Swainson’s hawk is and does.”

As well, predatory birds are at the top of their food chain. “If there are a lot of birds, we know the environment is healthy too,” he says, just as a decrease in their population can be a red flag. “If we pay attention, we can learn a lot from these birds,” Donald says. Raising people’s awareness may have a reciprocal effect for the birds too, in helping save more of them.

He has been a self-confessed “bird nut” all his life, and he still remembers an incident when he was about four years old. “Out of the trees came a little yellow bird,” he remembers. “It came fluttering down right towards me, and I couldn’t believe it.” The fledgling yellow warbler started him off on a lifelong passion for birding. He began working with pigeons while still in grade school in Vancouver. Through friends, he was drawn to kestrels, a small long-tailed hawk, and he has been involved with hawks and falcons ever since. “I don’t know why, I just was fixated on birds. It just became my thing. Then when I left high school I was able to get contract work with falcons, and it just seemed to lead from one contract to another, to this day.” He moved to Eastend after getting his degree, and made the community his home base as he pursued a career in falconry.

Because he also runs a functioning rehabilitation centre, Donald has a fluctuating number and variety of birds. He gets the birds from the University of Saskatchewan’s Western College of Veterinary Medicine in Saskatoon. Dr. Dennilyn Parker, assistant professor of Avian, Exotics and Zoological Medicine, says Donald

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“They’re not a pet you keep in a cage like you would a parrot. They’re a hunting bird.”

provides the only provincial facility that allows the birds to be released into the wild. When someone finds an injured bird on the road, they call a conservation officer or the RCMP, who will arrange for the bird to be delivered to the veterinary college. They take in up to 300 wild birds a year, injured by power lines, vehicles, or diseases that can leave them with permanent disabilities.

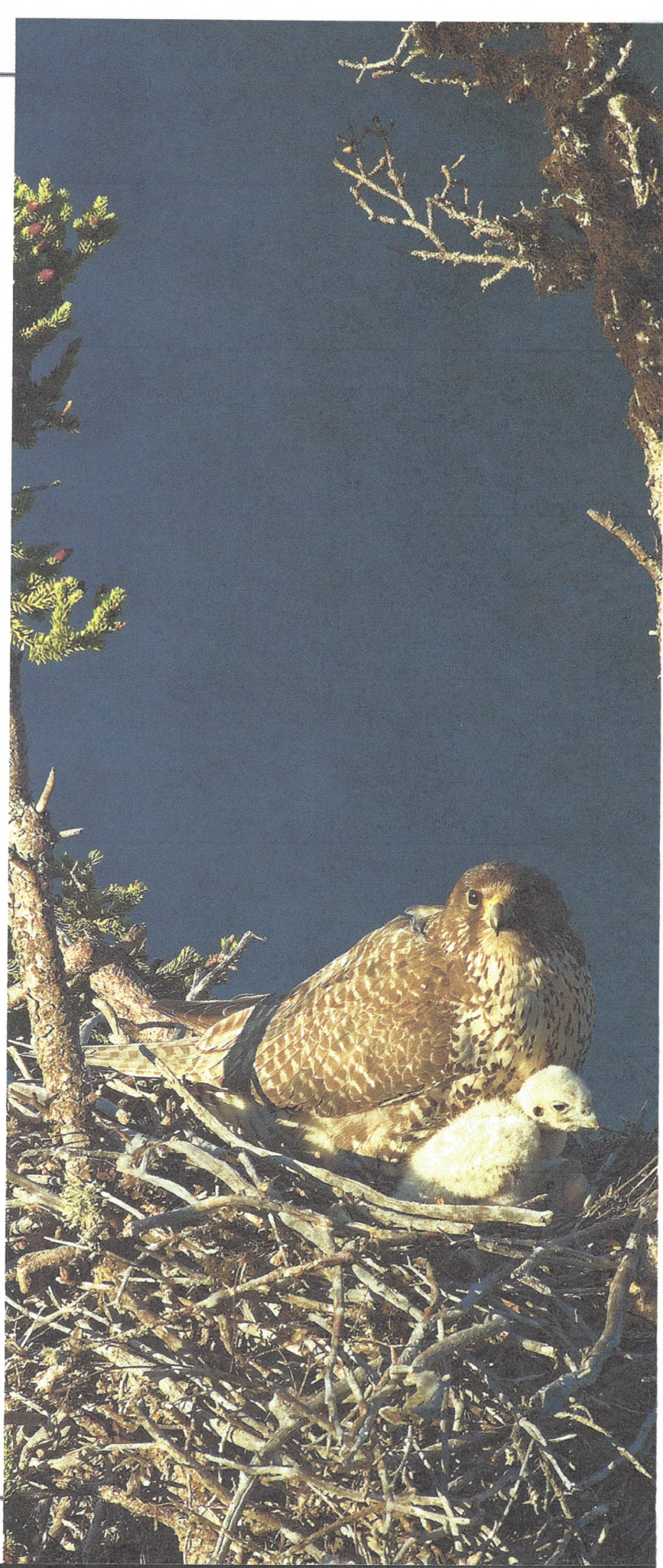
Only about 30 percent can be released again. The college will turn to Donald to house and care for the bird, and nurse it back to the point where it can be released into the wild to hunt on its own again. “He has the time and space and ability to train these birds,” Dr. Parker says. “They need to be pretty much in perfect condition to be released into the wild.” Donald is able to repair feathers, give them time to heal, train them, and evaluate their ability to survive after release. His level of knowledge and understanding makes falconry as much a calling as a job to him. “He is a falconer, at heart,” she adds. “Falconers have a very strong bond with birds of prey.”

Three birds remain with him: a 14-year-old russet-brown Swainson’s hawk named Sultan, a two-year-old gyrfalcon named Radar, and a red-tailed hawk.

“They’re not a pet you keep in a cage like you would a parrot,” he adds. “They’re a hunting bird. They can be trained to hunt. You can hunt them as a sport, or you can hunt them with the intent of releasing them back into the wild.” Sultan has been in captivity for about 14 years, since he lost a back toe—an injury that would jeopardize his chances of survival in the wild. In captivity, the bird may live to be 25. The big russet-brown hawk is a favorite at elementary school demonstrations given by students of the vet college, because of his relaxed and calm nature.

Radar has worked with Donald at the Toronto airport, to control smaller birds that can stray into flight paths at airports. Donald has also provided airport control for New York and Halifax airports.

Glen and Rebecca Grambo



Being a falconer is like being
a dairy farmer
—you never get a day off.

North Hill Cottage can house up to 16 birds of prey. Donald has had a variety of birds on site, such as the three main types of soaring hawks: Swainson's, red-tailed and ferruginous hawks, as well as peregrine falcons, gyrfalcons, kestrels, merlins, and horned owls. Normally, he releases birds into the wild by early spring. Other birds interfere with their ability to successfully reintegrate into the wild after midsummer. In 2005 he wintered 15 birds to allow several to molt properly. The best time of year for training is in the winter months, he adds, because their metabolism is high and they want to eat. "You've got all this wonderful attitude to work with. You can really crank them up."

Being a falconer is like being a dairy farmer, Donald says: you never get a day off. "A captive-bred hawk or falcon or eagle is a pampered bird. They're not stressed, they're catered to. We're basically their slaves, is what it really boils down to. We spend all the time that they need with them, all year round. There is no holiday from a hawk. Once you've got one, you've got it every day, all year long."

Donald watches to maintain optimum weight of about 890 grams in order to promote the best molt, hunting and breeding prowess. "If you're serious about your birds, this is the quality you aspire to," he adds. "Nothing else will do. It's all about perfection." Falconry also offers the chance to network with other people who have similar interests, and to train others.

"Falconry is an art form," Donald says. "It takes a long time to be accomplished at flying a bird. There's so much to learn, and you just keep discovering more and more and more. There is a satisfaction in helping a lot of birds," he adds. "The satisfaction is knowing that you've done all that anyone can do for these birds."



IN THE FILES

Saskatchewan is habitat for five species of true falcon: the American kestrel; the merlin; the peregrine; the prairie falcon; and the gyrfalcon.

Peregrine numbers were threatened in the early 70s due to the use of the pesticide DDT which caused contaminated birds to lay eggs with thin shells that crushed under their weight. DDT was banned in North America in 1972. Falcon numbers have since recovered somewhat, but the peregrine falcon is still considered a threatened species in Saskatchewan.

The largest of the three species, an adult male peregrine can grow as large as 43 cm high and 109 cm wide. It's capable of reaching speeds of up to 360 km/hr. It uses this advantage to attack—almost exclusively small birds—in mid-air. The peregrine is most frequently observed in spring and autumn when northern breeding birds are common. It makes its home along lakeshores, river valleys, in urban areas and in open fields.

The merlin grows up to 35 cm in length and 68 cm in width.

Like its relatives, its main weapons are speed, surprise and sharp talons. It also will snatch smaller birds in mid-air and can often be seen hovering around trees where it makes a meal of unsuspecting songbirds.

In Saskatchewan, the merlin is represented by two sub-species, the Richardson's merlin and the taiga merlin. The Richardson's is a common summer resident which



L.L. Melton

Blindfolding a falcon with a hood (*chaperone* in French) calms it by making it think it is night.

prefers to dwell in agricultural zones, while the taiga can be seen in the winter in northern parts of the province.

The American kestrel is the smallest of the three species, reaching just 30 cm in height and 62 cm in width.

Unlike the aforementioned species, the kestrel prefers to hover while hunting, in search of ground prey. It mainly eats insects and small rodents but has been known to take small birds, reptiles and amphibians.

The American kestrel was formerly known as the sparrow hawk. It commonly nests in tree cavities or nest boxes and favors logged areas.

— SHANNON LIZON

