

# ELC provides habitat for predatory birds

by Cathryn Bangs  
Contributing Writer

On a recent gloomy midwinter day numerous large birds sat perched quietly in tall cages. Their feather coats were of their bodies. Occasionally one turned its head to peer at a visitor.

They watched like hawks. . . On display at the John Inskeep Environmental Learning Center (ELC) are 11 birds of prey. Included in the collection are a screech owl, a kestrel (or sparrow hawk), a great horned owl, and many red-tailed hawks.

All of the birds have had injuries directly or indirectly because of the impact of humans and are unable to live on their own in the wild.

Lesley Winnop is the Birds of Prey coordinator for the ELC, a position she has held for three years. Her lifelong involvement with animals led her to volunteer at the Washington Park Zoo eight years ago. She has supplemented her experience with Bird Rehabilitation classes offered by the Audubon Society.

As coordinator for the ELC program Winnop's job involves all aspects of caring for the birds, training them, exercising them and handling them at educational presentations.

Predatory birds have been getting a lot of attention in recent years. Winnop explains why:

"None of the birds housed here are on the endangered species list but are important as 'environmental indicators.'"

Because they prey on mammals and insects (the owl eats insects), fluctuations in their populations caused by environmental factors will have a measurable effect on the predators' health and reproduction.

"They indicate the health of our environment," Winnop said, citing the familiar story of DDT causing thin egg shells and a great drop in particular bird populations.

"They're at the top of the food chain. What affects these birds affects us as well," elaborated Winnop.

Winnop uses some of the birds for educational presentations,



There are many red-tailed hawks on the ELC. The predatory birds at the ELC travel to schools to do educational presentations, and part of the point of doing the presentations is to dispel the "many myths" surrounding Birds of Prey.

Photo by Lane Scheideman



The great horned owl is another predatory birds in the Birds of Prey exhibit at the ELC.

Photo by Lane Scheideman

taking them to schools or giving talks at the Center.

"The birds really get their (the children's) attention," Winnop said.

As Winnop goes through a presentation she works to dispel the "many myths" surrounding birds of prey.

One myth is the idea of the "chicken hawk" hunting barnyard chickens. According to Winnop, predatory birds are actually helpful in controlling the rodent populations. Insect populations too, are kept in natural control by owls.

Many hawks are still shot, Winnop explained, injuring them and eventually causing the injured wing to be amputated. If they are found they end up at rehabilitation centers around the state.

During Winnop's presentations for children she explained how she "loves to watch their faces ... to see the light bulb go on" when they see the birds.

About the hawks Winnop said, "They each have a different personality."

Tinkerbell is a large female

though Winnop admits the name doesn't suit her. This hawk had a history of neglect and abuse and is becoming more aggressive as she ages.

Black, another female, has a bruised wing, but is being used in more presentations.

Winnop keeps a close watch on the birds' diet of mice and chicks. They will eat from 25 to 125 grams depending on the size of the bird.

Winnop must keep the birds that are able to fly at a "flying weight." This is a crucial weight where the bird is light enough to fly but not so hungry that it will fly away to hunt.

The bird is first flown on a "creance line," a long tether attached to the thongs around its lower legs. Tinkerbell flies with a line, Black has been "free flown," without any line.

Little Bit, a sparrow hawk, is the smallest of the birds. This one-winged male is housed indoors, where his beautiful plumage can be admired at close range. He recently became a resident when an old snag containing his nest

was chopped down, killing his mate and their young.

The ELC may be the recipient of an eagle later this year. Details have yet to be worked out with the donor, according to Winnop.

Only certain facilities are able

to keep birds of prey. Permits are required from state or federal agencies.

Public awareness is important to save these birds.

"Education is where it's going to come from," Winnop said.

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	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11(A)	12	13	14	15		
L*	39.12	65.43	49.87	44.26	55.56	70.82	63.51	39.92	52.24	97.06	92.02	87.34	82.14	72.06	62.15		
a*	13.24	18.11	-4.34	-13.80	9.62	-33.43	34.26	11.81	48.55	-0.40	-0.60	-0.75	-1.08	-1.19	-1.67		
b*	15.07	18.72	-22.29	22.85	-24.49	-0.35	59.60	-46.07	18.51	1.13	0.23	0.21	0.43	0.28	0.19		
D50 Illuminant, 2 degree observer											Density	0.04	0.09	0.15	0.22	0.36	0.51