

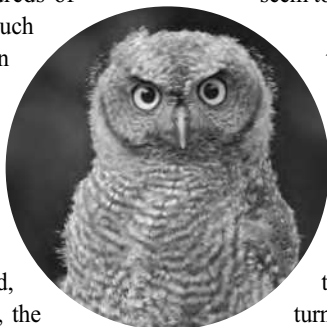
Beak to the Future

Cascades Raptor Center eyes avian flu threat.

Volunteers Diane Weaver and Wendy Ranger stand in the Cascades Raptor Center clinic, a brightly lit, cramped room where they treat hundreds of birds each year for ailments such as malnutrition and broken bones. Ranger holds a sharp-shinned hawk close to her body, carefully minding the bird's razor-sharp talons. The experienced animal rehabilitators make small talk as Weaver examines the bird, one wing at a time. Outside, the children of the family that brought the bird to CRC in a cardboard box peer into dark-screened cages, looking at the dozens of species of hawks, falcons, owls, corvids and eagles that make their homes at the hillside raptor rehabilitation and education facility on the outskirts of Eugene.

Weaver and Ranger agree the bird has a broken wing bone, but X-rays later that day will have to confirm their assessment. They wrap the wing to prevent damaging movement, administer vitamins and minerals and place the bird in a cage in the clinic. The mother who brought the sharp-shinned hawk to the Center tells the volunteers that her son found the bird when it had fallen, for no apparent reason, from high up in a tree to the ground directly in front of him. The story seems out-

landish even to someone with no experience caring for injured animals, and the quick glances between the wildlife rehabilitators seem to validate this feeling.



SCREECH OWL
TIM GREENFIELD

Raptors are most often injured through contact with humans or human constructions like barbed wire or electric lines. And the majority of the birds CRC cares for are brought in because of some detrimental human contact. But lately in the news this interaction has been turned on its head. Birds are seen as the species with the possibility to harm, while humans are warned, both directly and indirectly, to be wary of any interaction with birds.

The cause of this fear is the enormous amount of media coverage of avian flu over the last year. People are scared because of the virus' ability to spread from water fowl, in which the virus is most prevalent, to humans, causing death in more than half of those who have contracted it. The major fear is that this particular strain of avian flu, H5N1, will mutate into a form that can be passed directly between humans, thus beginning a worldwide pandemic reminiscent of the 1918-1919 Spanish flu that killed 500,000 people in the U.S. and 20 million to 50 million worldwide.

But as of now, there hasn't been one

proven case of avian flu passing between humans, and only a handful of people across the globe have contracted the virus from birds. Most of these cases have occurred in Asia, where humans and their domestic birds have far more contact in far less sanitary conditions than here in the U.S.

But Cascades Raptor Center executive director and founder Louise Shimmel isn't going to take any chances with her raptors, even though eagles, hawks and the like are far less likely than water birds, such as ducks and gulls, to contract the virus. Shimmel has begun budgeting for new roofs over the dozens of aviaries that house the resident education birds, such as Lorax, the great horned owl who has appeared on television, or Artemis and Diana, two barn owls who serve as foster parents to dozens of babies every year.

"We're not going to do anything until bird flu is here," says Shimmel. But if the virus reaches our nation's borders, CRC will react quickly. "It's more of a defense to make sure that no one comes and tells me I have to kill all of my birds."

With the vast amount of media coverage of avian flu, or bird flu, there is a very real possibility that people could become hysteric to the point of treating birds, including raptors, in harmful ways. "Just naming it bird flu is a problem," says Shimmel. "There's a chance for a backlash."

But Shimmel feels that planning ahead for a virus that might not even reach American borders has more benefits than drawbacks. The re-roofing of the aviaries is a logical first step. The new roofs will be necessary because

avian flu (of which there are at least 15 types other than H5N1 spread between wild and domestic birds) can spread through migratory birds' droppings, and if migratory birds fly over CRC and drop excrement into the raptor cages, these education birds could get sick without any direct contact with virus-carrying birds.

As of now, the aviaries at CRC have screened roofs that allow for a more natural environment for the birds. When it rains, the raptors are rained on, just as they would be in their natural habitat. The roofs Shimmel is planning will have sprinkler systems attached so the resident birds would still experience rainy conditions as they would in the wild.

In 2004, CRC dealt with another virus that was making headlines worldwide, and Shimmel was glad they prepared in advance. A red-tailed hawk was brought to CRC that had contracted West Nile virus. The bird was rigid and wouldn't eat. Its chance for survival was slim. But after seven months of rigorous rehabilitation the bird was re-released back into its natural habitat.

Shimmel had taken precautions against West Nile in 2003, before the virus started spreading across the country. She had the raptors-in-residence vaccinated, and covered all the aviaries with tightly hemmed screens to prevent contact with mosquitoes that could possibly be carrying the virus.

By preparing for West Nile before it was a problem CRC was able to keep all its birds healthy, and even rehabilitate a very sick bird. But everyone at the center hopes that their preparations for avian flu won't be as warranted. **EW**

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