

Social Identity

Biology lessons at the Cascades Raptor Center

Imprinting: a vibrant impression, an indelible memory pressed into the brain's gray matter like a thumbprint, a wildflower. In raptors, the word evokes the critical days after a hatchling emerges from the shell; the first creatures around it — be they bird or animal or human — become the baby's primary role models.

I contemplated imprinting on a recent Sunday at the Cascades Raptor Center as I spoke to a couple and their young son about the year-old great-horned owl perched on my gloved arm. The boy's eyes widened as I described the owl's fall at three weeks old, 45 feet from the nest. "She broke her wing in several places, which didn't heal well enough for her to hunt in the wild," I explained.

"She lives at the center and travels to local schools as an education bird."

The boy clutched his own arm to his side, seized by a flurry of new ideas. "Why does she have horns?" he asked. And so we talked feathers and camouflage, beaks and talons and wings.

The couple also had a baby. Attracted by a movement in the stroller, the owl on my glove swiveled her head. I followed her black and yellow gaze to the child who waved a tiny hand in our direction.

What wonders must impress themselves on an infant's mind when she looks out at the world and finds it populated, not just with loving parents and spoonfuls of pureed pears, but with sky and trees and owls? A baby bird looks to its parents for a sense of social identity. What clues to identity do baby humans learn from parents and others who introduce them to a life beyond the confines of wall and TV screen and computer monitor?

The education team at CRC broadens perspectives by bringing birds to children. Volunteers take resident raptors to area schools, hoping to enhance appreciation, respect, and stewardship of the natural world. Raptors reside at the top of the food chain; in studying owls and hawks, falcons, eagles, osprey, and vultures, we can examine the effects of population growth. This "indicator species" allows us to comprehend the impacts of subdivisions where forests used to stand; the advantages and disadvantages of harnessing windpower; the results of beneficial insect-loss due to spraying for gypsy moths. Mostly, however, members of the education team hope to impart a love of the natural world. As well as meeting the birds through school visits, thousands of children across the county take field trips to CRC.

Sometimes, they ask of our great-horned owl, "Does she think you're her mother?"

"No," I say, relieved. Too often, people attempt illegally to raise owls, robins, and crows fallen from the nest or otherwise orphaned. They argue that in doing so, they're giving their own children a firsthand look at natural science. However, when we do this, we also keep the bird from living a normal life in the wild. Birds that imprint upon creatures other than their parents don't learn properly how to hunt or interact with others of their kind. In essence, raising a raptor in one's home, no matter how loving and respectful the intention, gives the bird a full-fledged identity crisis.

We're lucky in Lane County to have two facilities dedicated to rehabilitating injured or orphaned birds. Both the skilled volunteers caring for songbirds and waterfowl at Willamette Wildlife and those ministering to raptors at the Cascades Raptor Center understand the dangers of imprinting. Volunteers take every precaution to ensure that babies *want* to bite the hand that feeds them. This ensures the bird's successful reentry into the wild.

Last week, I helped return a baby great-horned owl to a forest near Junction City. Scott Altenhoff from the city of Eugene Parks Department volunteered his time and equipment. His little girl looked on as he ascended through fir branches toward a makeshift basket-nest while two adult great-horned owls hooted and swooped from tree to tree around us. The owners of the property, along with their own daughter, came out to watch as my husband and I placed the fuzzy baby owl in a bag tied to Scott's rope.

Happily, a human baby enjoys numerous role models long past its first few weeks of life. The little girls giggled and gaped as they watched the bag rise toward the nest box, guided by a group of adults dedicated to preserving the life of one bird. What images of that afternoon remain with them, impressed upon the delicate pages of those young minds?

Melissa Hart is a member of the Cascades Raptor Center's Education and Animal Care Teams. The Center's 12th annual Open House takes place from noon to 5 pm Sunday, April 23. The free event offers families the opportunity to meet 60 raptors, enjoy refreshments, live music, children's activities, and behind-the-scenes tours. For more information, visit www.eraptors.org or call 485-1320.



What the article did not mention was that the inspiration to bring this unique and powerful event for teens to Eugene was born out of the Oregon Country Fair's own youth program, Culture Jam, a model also created by Power of Hope. In August each year a diverse group of 45-50 youth ages 14-18 gather on the OCF site with 25 dynamic artists, naturalists and community activists. The result is often life-changing for those who attend: a one-week, arts-based immersion experience giving youth the opportunity to believe in themselves, discover what they truly care about and bring all that good energy back into their community to make positive change in the world.

If anyone wants to learn more about Culture Jam, take a look at the OCF website at www.oregoncountryfair.org

Congrats to city of Eugene Youth Recreation Services for making such an innovative and exciting youth empowerment model like Hip Hop Hope available to Eugene teens!

*Robin Bernardi
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means only more "grass and trees," and that the land is not already urbanized. These assumptions warrant scrutiny.

Last year I joined group of interested citizens of various viewpoints (the "riparianistas") to discuss Eugene's riverfront and how we might best protect and enjoy it. We agreed on several points that we hope will help start a community discussion about what's best for Eugene's Willamette River. View our ideas, and the text of our presentation to City Club of Eugene at www.bluegreeneugene.blogspot.com

Our Willamette is an asset of the highest value and deserves efforts for its enhancement that occur through cooperation, not an "us versus them" shouting match. We can create and implement a vision for Eugene's riverfront that benefits people, plants and animals. The first step is not demanding specific outcomes. We should first discover what really lies at the water's edge — the edge formed by a promising young city and a far-reaching old stream.

*Phillip Carroll
Eugene*

IT'S OUR RIVERFRONT

Your "Slant" column of April 6 stated that the best use for riverside land EWEB is planning to vacate when it moves its operations facilities would be the creation of a park. Among your assumptions implicit in this conclusion are that any development other than parkland would benefit the few over the many, that care of the Willamette necessarily

NO INPUT SOUGHT

The City Council set a nice example by holding community forums to give residents a voice in the future of City Hall. For the proposed development on Friendly Street, the builders state their intention to build green, offer affordable housing, create a venue for neighborhood activities, schedule a community meeting to obtain citizen input. Yes!

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