



AUTHOR MELISSA HART AND HUSBAND JONATHAN
RELEASE A RED-TAILED HAWK AT THEIR NUPTIALS

A Hoot of a Ceremony

LOCAL AUTHOR MELISSA HART REMEMBERS HER WEDDING
AT **CASCADES RAPTOR CENTER** *By Melissa Hart*

“Jonathan? Melissa? Meet us on the lawn and close your eyes.”

Grinning staff members at the Cascades Raptor Center led us past our lopsided wedding cake to the grass outside the visitors' center. “We have a gift for you ... *don't peek.*” For years, we'd volunteered to clean mews, feed

orphaned owls and medicate injured hawks at the nature center and wildlife hospital in Eugene. After Jonathan proposed, we asked to marry at the center.

My mother wrote for a glossy wedding magazine. Reading her articles, I absorbed an abundance of white tulle, three-tiered cakes, snowy linen tablecloths. We rejected these niceties in favor of shivering in the cold

of a March afternoon with Lorax, the great-horned owl, as our ring-bearer and volunteers with other resident birds on their gloves.

“This is the strangest wedding I've ever been to,” my mother-in-law observed from a folding chair perched on damp grass. “I love it.”

Our ceremony lasted five minutes, conducted by a purple-haired minister. At one point, Lorax ripped our rings from the ribbon around her foot and hurled them into the mud. During our first kiss as a married couple, the resident raven called out, “What'cha doing?”

Our guests laughed, a loving response to our world.

After an apple cider toast, after pieces of the cake I'd festooned inexpertly with wildflowers, the staff requested our presence on the lawn. I closed my eyes, felt the assistant director slip leather gloves onto my hands. Beside me, Jonathan chuckled.

“You can open your eyes now.”

He stood with a hooded red-tailed hawk in his arms — a bird we'd helped to feed and medicate during its recovery from injury. “It's healed now,” staff said, “ready to release into the wild.”

Jonathan, ever generous, handed me the hawk and loosened its tiny leather hood. I clasped its strong legs in my hands, held it against my chest. “Just toss it into the air,” my new husband coached. “One, two, three!”

The bird flew over our heads and landed in a Doug fir. Our guests applauded. My brother handed out wedding favors — beribboned birdseed balls. A friend toasted us with a splash of cider. “That sure beat watching Jonathan remove Melissa's garter with his teeth.”

Sometimes now, we return to the Cascades Raptor Center and stand on the lawn together. Sometimes a hawk soars high above the trees. Then, we remember the wild fulfillment of our marriage day.

Melissa Hart teaches at the UO School of Journalism and Communication. Lyons Press will publish her memoir — Wildness Within: A Romance, an Adoption, and a Baby Barred Owl — in August 2014.



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