

# Rehabilitating raptors

Heather Merritt helps birds of prey soar after being grounded by illness or injury

*Story Kim Marino, Photos Laura Freeman, Design Holly Murphy*

She backed her truck down the boat launch ramp and hoisted a retriever-sized plastic pet crate to the lake's edge. She laughed when she opened the cage door and gray goslings tripped over one another in their rush to the water. As she answered questions for two bicyclists who observed the release, she kept a watchful eye on the small geese swimming into a sheltered cove.

If she had stepped out of a minivan in a different parking lot, the 5-foot-6, 35-year-old woman with curly blonde hair would have blended in with other suburban soccer moms. But Heather Merritt is a raptor and waterfowl rehabilitator.

Below: Heather Merritt has a special relationship with her education birds, which can no longer survive in the wild. Right: This great horned owl was hit by a car and suffered a detached retina. It can no longer hunt and is used by Merritt for educational purposes.





Above: Wild Harris' hawks use sophisticated hunting techniques in which up to six hawks will take turns chasing prey until it is caught. This Harris' hawk had a toe amputated and is now used for educational programs. Right: 7-year-old Annie Randall of Bainbridge, Ohio, gets her picture taken with a gray screech owl. Below right: The gray screech owl has distinct ear tufts, and its coloring resembles tree bark.

Being a rehabber is more a lifestyle or a calling than a job. Merritt must be part nurse, part entrepreneur, part scientist and completely devoted to survive in this line of work. Her patients don't come with insurance policies, can't tell her where it hurts and don't thank her when they are healed and ready to leave her care. But she smiles when she talks about the work.

"It's so rewarding, to see that great horned owl flying in that pen back there when it came in and couldn't even stand up," Merritt said. "It's unbelievable, the feeling that you get."

Merritt grew up caring for animals. At 3-years-old, her first rescue was a chipmunk she took away from the family cat. The ungrateful chipmunk bit her. Merritt's mother, Carol Yova, quarantined the chipmunk in a cage in the barn to test it for rabies.

"The chipmunk died," Yova said. "But it died because it drowned. It rained in the barn and flooded, so Heather had to have the shots anyway. And that's when they gave rabies shots in the stomach."

That love of animals brought Merritt to

rehabbing in a round about manner. While in college, she worked for a veterinarian. She enjoyed the work and left college. During her four years at the vet's office, she met some people with lions and tigers, and she got an educational permit to work with the exotic animals.

A phone call from a friend triggered Merritt's change of direction. The friend needed help catching an injured owl in her backyard. Merritt didn't even put on gloves and says the videotape someone made of her first bird rescue is hysterically funny, a lesson in the wrong way to capture a bird. But she consulted with a veterinarian, and the owl recovered.

"I was doing lions and tigers," Merritt said. "They would go to a pen. They're never released; they're never free. And when I let the first great horned owl go, I was like, 'Ooh, ooh, wait; I like this. This is kind of neat.'"

Merritt says she thought rehabbing would provide a great way to stay home with her young children and still do something she enjoyed, so she checked into the permit process and took a class in Akron.



Ten years have flown by since Merritt's first awkward rescue. Now she always wears gloves, and she knocks on wood when she says she has never been injured by one of her birds.

At her Birds in Flight Sanctuary in Trumbull County, Ohio, she cares for injured, orphaned or sick raptors and waterfowl. She refers songbirds to a different sanctuary in the area. The goal is to return birds to

the wild, if possible, and she works with a licensed veterinarian to determine the best plan to heal each bird.

Depending on illness or injury and size, birds are kept in indoor or outdoor cages. Some birds practice flying and landing on perches in the 40-foot flight pens.

Before she releases a raptor, Merritt watches for behaviors that show her the bird is capable of and willing to hunt. She

says her release rate is 93 to 95 percent. Spring is usually her busiest season, but West Nile virus patients needed care from late summer through mid-fall this year.

West Nile virus swept through the raptor population with alarming speed and devastating results in the past couple of summers. Last year Merritt had 87 cases. Sometimes five or six birds arrived the same day. When birds are on intravenous support, she checks on them every two hours. Some must be tube fed every three to four hours.

### What to do if you find an injured or ill bird

#### Do Not Touch

Do not give food or water

Do not assume unattended fledglings are orphans – allow time for the parents to return

Search for a local wildlife rehabilitator

- Call the local non-emergency police number
- Contact your state's Division of Wildlife for a list
- Search the Internet
  - [www.wildlife-rehabilitators.com](http://www.wildlife-rehabilitators.com)
  - some states have wildlife rehabilitator associations

The barn owl has a white, heart-shaped face with a distinct brown edge. Its eyes are dark. The body is covered with gray markings and spots on the feathers. It relies on silent flight for hunting.



She contacted the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Cornell University as well as other rehabbers, such as Laura Jordan of Medina County, for suggestions and support. Jordan said she took in about 40 species this season with West Nile, but none of them survived.

"It blindsided us," Jordan said. "By the time the Feds figured out what it was, we were well into it, knee deep. We only had other rehabilitators to talk to and to console and to help each other through it. That's all we could do."

Merritt saved more birds this year than last, but each bird with West Nile virus can cost \$500 to \$1,000 to treat.

"If the bird lives the first three days, the amount probably goes that high," Merritt said. "But some don't make it six hours. Half the time, you're driving out, and the people call and say it's dead already."

Donations collected at educational programs help offset the costs of medicine, food and shelter. For a \$10 donation, adults or children can have a photo taken with their choice of raptor. But Merritt estimates that 90 percent of what she has done over the years has been done with her own money. Her suppliers and service providers value her work and sometimes let her stretch out payments. Or she charges medications and pays off the credit card when donations come in.

"You never get ahead," Merritt said. "And if you do get ahead, you go buy cages or something else."

It took Merritt six months to buy enough wood for her flight pen. She is fortunate to get financial support from family members, but she knows rehabbers who can't afford to continue.

Birds in Flight Sanctuary teamed with the Lake Milton Raptor Education Center to create a sponsorship program called Adopt-a-Bird. It mirrors zoo programs, which offer thank you gifts for donating at species-specific levels. American kestrel sponsorship costs \$50 per year while sponsoring a great horned owl costs \$150. Merritt estimates she feeds her birds an average of five bags of day-old chicks and 33 rats per day.

In addition to West Nile virus, birds come to Merritt's sanctuary with bacterial infections like Bumble Foot or brittle bone conditions. Falling out of a nest injures some birds, and others need care because cars have hit them. When raptors hunt, they focus so intently on the prey that their tunnel vision prevents them from seeing vehicles. Collisions can cause broken bones and detached retinas.

Certain injuries prevent birds from living a normal life in the wild. Birds that cannot be released are kept for educational programs. Although she displays only those birds that are comfortable in an educational setting, she does not permit anyone to

touch the birds.

“Once I had a boy ask if he could touch the bird I was holding,” Merritt said. “I said, ‘Not if you like your finger,’ and he pulled his hand back. Then the boy’s mother held out her hand saying, ‘I don’t like this finger so much; could I pet him with this finger?’”

This year Merritt connected with an educator, Aimee Pico of the Lake Milton Raptor Education Center. Pico said she was referred to Merritt when one of her birds was ill.

**W**hen Pico found out that Merritt planned a large display for the outdoor show at the Eastwood Expo Center in Niles, Ohio, she volunteered to help and add her birds, too. The two women realized that together they have a strong program. Each has different birds, so they present a variety of sizes and species from tiny merlins to brawny red-tailed hawks. The arrangement also allows Merritt to put on educational programs and still respond to emergencies.

“When I was putting on programs alone, I would have to pack up and leave if I got a call,” Merritt said. “But by working with an educator, I can respond to calls, and the program can continue. I had three calls during one program. I never know when I may have to leave.”

Merritt must respond immediately when she gets a call that an endangered species such as a bald eagle, a trumpeter swan or an osprey is down because she has special federal permits. Endangered species regulations are strict, and a limited number of rehabilitators qualify for these permits. Merritt waited until she was in her 10th year of rehabbing to apply.

“Dealing with a red-tail and an eagle is very different,” Merritt said. “They’re much stronger. You can get hurt pretty bad.”

Merritt travels throughout northeastern Ohio to present educational programs. Locations vary from churches to schools, from Harry Potter parties to sporting goods stores.

One windy Saturday in October, she set up a display at a Boy Scout Camporall in Clay’s Park Resort near Canal Fulton, Ohio. People asked questions and shared bird stories. One man casually picked a feather from the ground while he was chatting. He took off his dark fedora and started to insert the feather in the hatband.

“Did you know you are breaking the law?” Merritt said.

“Oh, really?” the man said, still searching for the right location in the hatband.

“It is illegal to possess the feather of any migratory bird.”

“Doesn’t that just apply to eagles?”

Below: Talons are used for capturing and tearing prey. They are just as dangerous as the bird’s beak, and handlers take special precautions by wearing thick gloves. Bottom left: The turkey vulture cleans up nature by feeding on dead animals. It regurgitates its stomach contents when threatened in order to frighten away attackers. This turkey vulture shows off its 6-foot wing span.



This American kestrel stretched its wings and enjoyed the flow of a stiff breeze under sleek feathers. A male kestrel is identified from a female by its blue head. Kestrels are the smallest falcons in North America.

**“You never get ahead, and if you do get ahead, you go buy cages or something else.”**



“The migratory bird act covers almost all birds.” She named the few it doesn’t protect.

“But I just picked it up off the ground.” The man pulled the feather out of the hatband.

“A few people have spoiled it for everyone. There is no way for an officer to know if you picked it up or if you killed the bird to obtain it.”

“Oh,” the man said as he let the strong wind float the feather from his hand to the grass a few feet away. “Thanks.”

Merritt has a quick smile and an easy laugh, but her jaw tightens when people don’t abide by the law.

**S**ince she has been rehabbing for so long, some police officers will pick up birds and transport them to her or to a meeting place. Game wardens tease her because they get paid for operating educational booths and handling wildlife, and she gets no state or federal funding. Many people express surprise when hearing that she is regulated by state and federal government but not compensated by any organization or corporation.

Carolyn Caldwell is a program administrator for the Division of Wildlife and says volunteer wildlife rehabilitators work hand in hand with Division of Wildlife officers. She explains Ohio has different categories of rehabilitation permits cover-

ing native mammals, birds and rabies-carrying species. The application package for each category specifies training, experience and cage requirements.

Bird rehabilitators must qualify for a category-two state permit plus a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permit. New rehabbers must take a training course and serve a three-year apprenticeship to be licensed, and Merritt thinks that is a wise way to learn.

Her neighbors are very supportive of what she does, but Merritt says she no longer tells people where her sanctuary is located. In the first couple years people dropped off injured birds while she was not home, and she came home to a deck full of dead birds in boxes.

She loves what she does, but wants people to be considerate of her family when they call at 2 a.m. Rehabbers don’t get to turn off the answering machine and pass the responsibility to the next shift. Merritt looks beyond inopportune timing and takes pride in her ability to heal and get the birds back where they belong.

“Rehabbers are very protective of their ‘children,’” Merritt said. “We protect them because they’ve come to us. And it’s our job to do what we can.”