

Nose to Beak with Mountsberg's Birds of Prey

For animal lovers, getting close to and actually handling creatures other than cats and dogs can be a delightful experience. Conservation Halton offers an amazing experience through their private Mountsberg Raptor Encounter.

BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT
PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS EXCEPT WHERE NOTED

Love shines in the face of Sandra Davey, Mountsberg Raptor Centre lead, as she looks at Shadow, a Barn Owl.



SANDRA DAVEY, raptor lead at Mountsberg near Campbellville, seems to have a mutual emotional connection with the Barn Owl Shadow. Recently bought by the Centre for their program, he was born in captivity and is accepting of people, which may be why he is able to perch on strangers' gloved hands. During a raptor encounter, it may be possible to get very close to Shadow.

A private raptor encounter lets a maximum of five people have a behind-the-scenes visit at the Raptor Centre. The encounter can be tailored to the group's age and interests, with some options including examining preserved parts of deceased birds, learning about the birds' food, seeing some birds in indoor cages, watching a flying demonstration, and perhaps even handling a raptor.

Mountsberg Raptor Centre has 15 species of native birds of prey, most of whom cannot survive in the wild, either due to permanent injuries or because they have bonded closely with humans. Some of these birds now act as ambassadors, teaching people about their species and needs. Eagles, turkey vultures, falcons, hawks and owls can be seen at the Centre, and some may be shown close up in a scheduled raptor encounter.

Wings and Claws

Even when birds die, they may be used at the Centre for important teaching purposes. Their feet, claws, wings and even skulls may be preserved for people to see, compare and handle.

"Staff can prepare their wings and feet [for preservation]," says Sandra. "Kids want to poke their fingers through the feathers but we try to teach them respect because they were real animals."

Explaining that because Barn Owls hunt by sound, their wings are silent, Sandra

lets people flap one of their wings as proof. By comparison, Red-tailed Hawks hunt by sight, so their wings make more sound when flying. Indeed, flapping one of their wings produces some noise.

Live Birds

Before letting people get close to some live raptors in the staff-only area, Sandra summarizes the daily work.

"The first task in the morning is to weigh the teaching birds," she says. "Five are being actively flight trained so we need to maintain their food and weight more. Of the teaching birds, the two Turkey Vultures are the heaviest birds being weighed every day. But the Bald Eagle is our heaviest bird."

The raptors' diet is not for the faint of heart. They eat a variety of meat, from a menu of day-old chicks raised in the Centre's own barn, rats, chicken, fish and quail. Everything is dead and kept in the freezer, and served according to the birds' food preferences and schedule. Food preparation is complex, with only the most nutritious and digestible parts being used. The dead chicks are manually dissected and everything but the internal organs are discarded. Seeing this done can be unpleasant.

Mimicking life in the wild, birds may have a fast day once a week, because hunting is not always successful. Strict carnivores, raptors must eat meat and can have no grain.

Because most raptors are not social birds, most are kept alone in their large cages. The Centre does keep two Red-Tailed Hawks and two Peregrine Falcons together, because they all get along.

► Lara Butt with the Barn Owl Jazz landing on her glove during a flying demonstration in the netted flyway at the Raptor Centre.





▲ Jazz the 11-year-old female Barn Owl on the glove of Lara Butt.



▲ Spruce, the male Great Horned Owl, in a part of the outdoor weathering area.



▲ Sandra Davey shows how a leather anklet and jess, or strap used in falconry, attach to a large raptor's foot. At the Centre, these items remain on the bird all the time, for safe control.

"Sometimes wild Turkey Vultures check out our captive Vultures," says Sandra, "and Bald Eagles can fly over. Our resident birds will alert the staff." A captive Bald Eagle's cry is piercing.

Sandra goes on to explain that the Centre personalizes the birds' cages. Casey the Turkey Vulture, who can't fly at all, has ramps set up so that he can walk everywhere.

Beyond the staff offices and preparation area is an outdoor weathering area where birds are kept temporarily to enjoy their choice of sun or shade, and to bathe to cool down. Two Great Horned Owls were seen here, Spruce the male, and Octavius, the larger female. Sandra says that all birds of prey tend to have

females that are bigger than the males, because females defend their nests more, while males will hunt and bring back food.

Mountsberg is part of an important project to help the endangered Eastern Loggerhead Shrike breed and recover its numbers in the wild. This project was reported on in the Nov. 21, 2011 blog post at www.NEViews.ca, and can still be seen there today. Sandra says that in 2014, 24 Shrikes were released from Mountsberg into their wild, natural habitats.

Inside the raptor staff area, a two-year-old Shrike called Pierce lives in a large cage and is used to educate people. He eats live superworms, mealworms and crickets, and has the unique Shrike habit of using thorns to tear

food apart for eating or as a place to store food for later.

Raptors in Flight

There is no doubt that the most dramatic part of a Raptor Encounter is the flying demonstration. The good news is that weather permitting, this is offered to the public almost every day from May to October, as part of admission to Mountsberg Conservation Area. There is a netted flyway where the birds can fly safely from post to a staff person's glove, often right over the heads of seated visitors. During a raptor encounter, the flying demonstration may be private.

Staff member Lara Butt showed the flying skills of two birds, the American Kestrel Bean and the Barn

Owl Jazz. Since this article was researched, six-year-old Bean died from an infection that couldn't be successfully treated. He had been kept at the Centre because he was blind in one eye. Despite this, he could fly to hand where he would receive a meaty reward.

"He vocalizes when fed," said Lara at the time. "Kestrels are semi social."

Jazz the Barn Owl is an 11-year-old female who in the wild, would hunt only rodents, and by hearing alone. It is an eerie experience to have this owl fly low overhead in utter silence, her wings making no sound.

After Lara's demonstrations, Sandra entered the flyway with Shadow, the five-year-old male Barn Owl. After his



▲ A Turkey Vulture's wingspan is the length of Sandra's arm.



▲ Pierce, the Eastern Loggerhead Shrike, with a superworm in his beak. He quickly ate all the worms given him, without demonstrating the technique of caching food on a thorn.



▲ Barn Owl Shadow on the glove of Gloria Hildebrandt, who is looking up at a male robin with a nest nearby. It had entered the flyway to scold the raptors.



▲ Lara Butt with Bean, the American Kestrel.



▲ Not for the squeamish: dead day-old chicks are taken apart to become food for the raptors.

flying exercises, Sandra gave a glove first to me and then to Mike. We each held the owl on our hand, truly a remarkable encounter with a special raptor. The 45-minute Raptor Experience can be booked through 905.854.2276

extension 3300 or www.conservation-halton.ca/experience-the-raptors or mtsberg@hrca.on.ca. The cost is \$80 for a group of a maximum of five people. This price includes admission to the park. **NEV**



▲ Mike Davis holding Shadow. PHOTO BY GLORIA HILDEBRANDT.