



How to **Shoot** **Birds** of **Prey:**

PORTRAITS FROM **MOUNTSBERG RAPTOR CENTRE**

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS
BY RICHARD RALLON

I teach a photography class at Mississauga's Living Arts Centre and show my images from Mountsberg Raptor Centre. Many of my students want to know how to shoot through a fence. Here are some images and a description of when and how to photograph through a cage.

▲ The Golden Eagle named Ayasha.

▲ Cornelius, a Bald Eagle.

Conservation Halton's Mountsberg Raptor Centre in Mountsberg Conservation Area is one of my favourite places to visit. My wife and I frequently photograph the eagles, falcons, hawks and owls that reside there, many of which have been injured and are unable to be returned to the wild.

I lean towards a close-up or portrait style of a photographic image, primarily due to the photographic challenges encountered with bird habitats at Mountsberg. They are housed in pens with standard fencing or mesh between you and the raptor. They sit on a perch at the back, middle or the front of their pens. The raptor's position within the pen is something that you have no control over. Some days you win and some days you lose.

For a photographer this can be very frustrating and a challenge. However, it's not just the mesh or the subject's position. It's also your camera's lens or focal length, the I.S.O., camera controls and the lighting conditions.

I prefer an overcast day because there is less chance of highlights or shine on the mesh, which will become visible and distracting even if it is out of focus. I will still shoot on a sunny day but I always have a hat with me so that I can use it to cast a shadow on the mesh. I then try to shoot through that portion of the mesh within the shadow.

The Lens

As for your camera equipment, I recommend using a 200mm to 300mm focal length lens. The aperture, iris or f# selection should be set at the lens's largest opening such as 2, 2.8, 3.5 or 4 which will depend on your lens.

The large aperture is used in order to have as little depth of field as possible. The reason for this is so that the mesh and

the background are blurry or out of focus. This also means that your subject's focus must be as accurate as possible.

If it's a headshot, I try to focus on the eyes or just in front of them.

Depth of field or the area of focus will always be one-third in front of your focus point and two thirds behind it. The area of focus depends on the f-number that you are using, the focal length of the lens and how physically close you are to the subject.

Focus

Unfortunately, low light levels within the pen may also cause problems for your camera's auto focus. Sometimes it inadvertently picks up the mesh. To resolve this, I recommend using the manual focus and the single-centred spot focus. I have learned through trial and error that when I use the manual focus, I rely on the beep my camera makes when it acknowledges that it has focused.

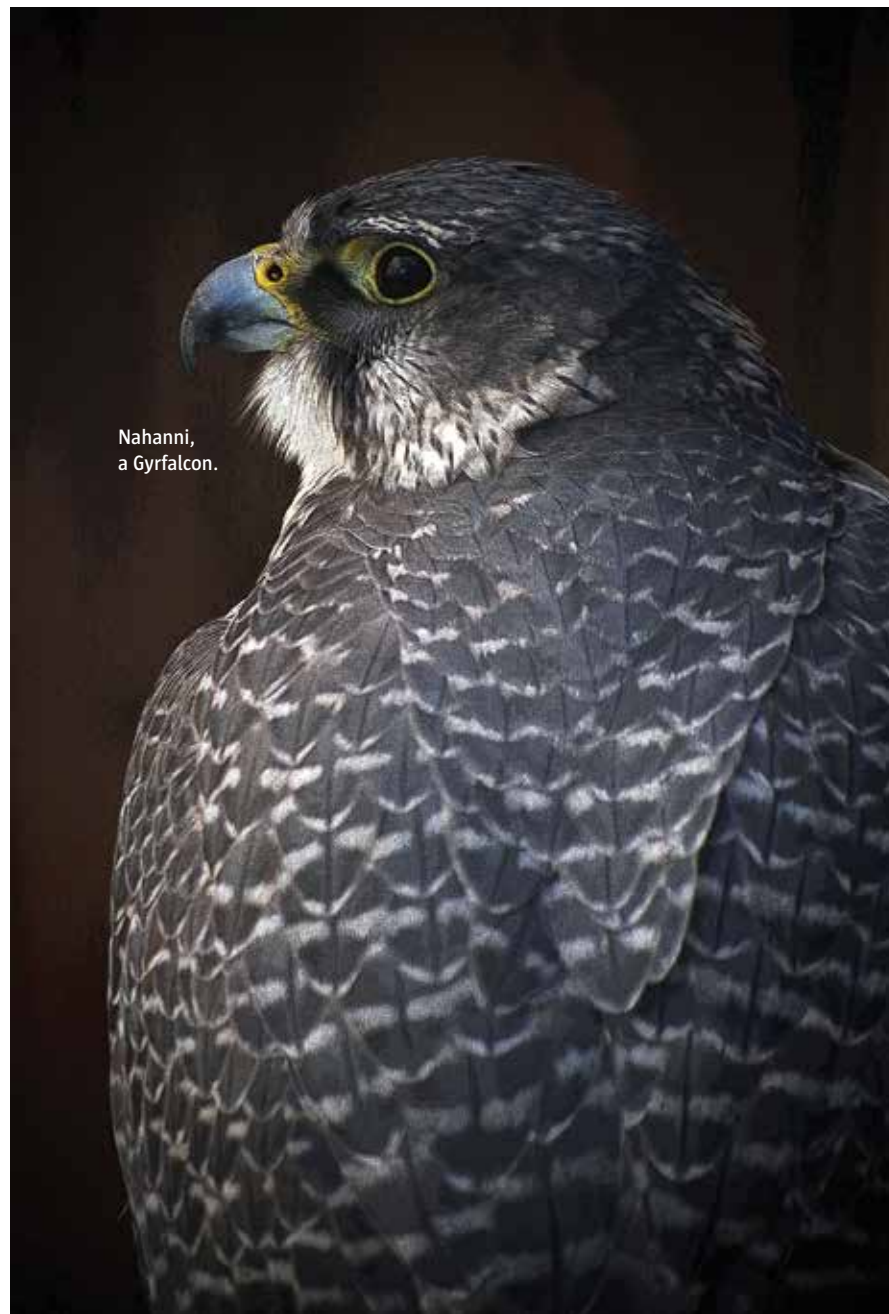
I.S.O. & White Balance

If there is a low light level within the pen, I use an I.S.O setting of 1600 and if need be 3200. Unfortunately, a side effect of a higher than normal I.S.O. is the increase of noise or grain. However, the high I.S.O. will help in obtaining a faster shutter speed that will help prevent camera shake and/or subject movement. A sharp grainy image is much better than a fine grain blurry one.

The white balance is another camera control that needs to be looked at. I usually rely on the white balance set to auto and any colour correction can be made in your computer software.

Tripod & Stabilizer

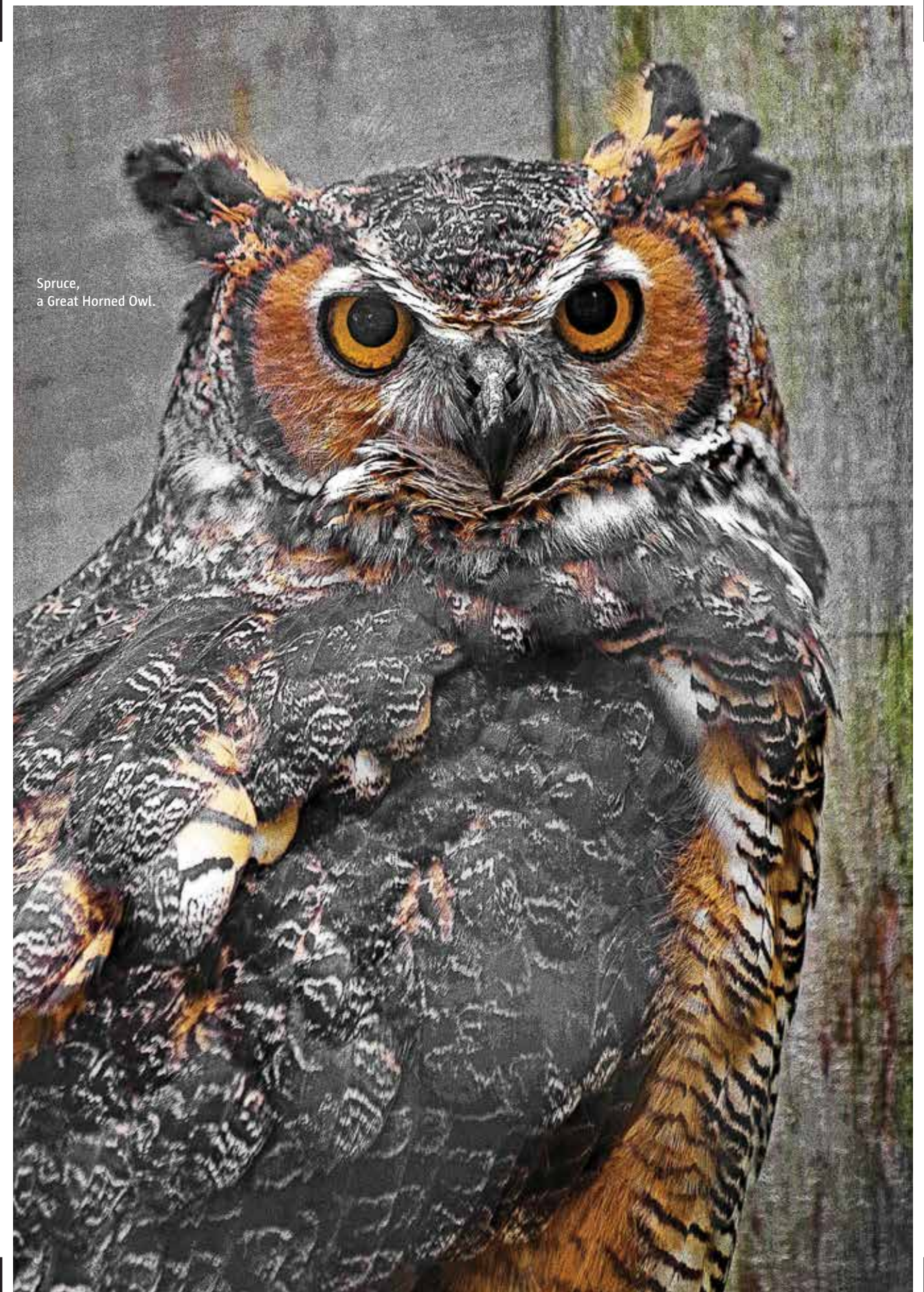
Use a tripod if you have one. It adds stability to the camera and allows for more control



Nahanni,
a Gyr Falcon.



A glimpse of Nahanni's underside while stretching.



Spruce,
a Great Horned Owl.



Angry bird?
Another Bald Eagle, Phoenix.



Barn Owl Jazz in profile.



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while focusing on the bird, its movements and frees your hand to cast a shadow on the mesh. When using a tripod, you should turn off the camera or lens stabilizer.

The Camera

When it comes to my camera settings, I start by setting the dial to A or AV which is the semi-automatic mode where you select the aperture and the camera selects the shutter speed. I find using this mode makes it easy to select the lens's maximum opening of f4.

Now, this semi-automatic exposure control alone does not guarantee that the image will be properly exposed. Depending on the lighting condition, your first image could be too light. If it is, you should then use the camera's exposure compensation control.

If you're not familiar with this, it's usually a small button



▲ Octavious, a Great Horned Owl, is actually female.




► A closer look at Octavious.

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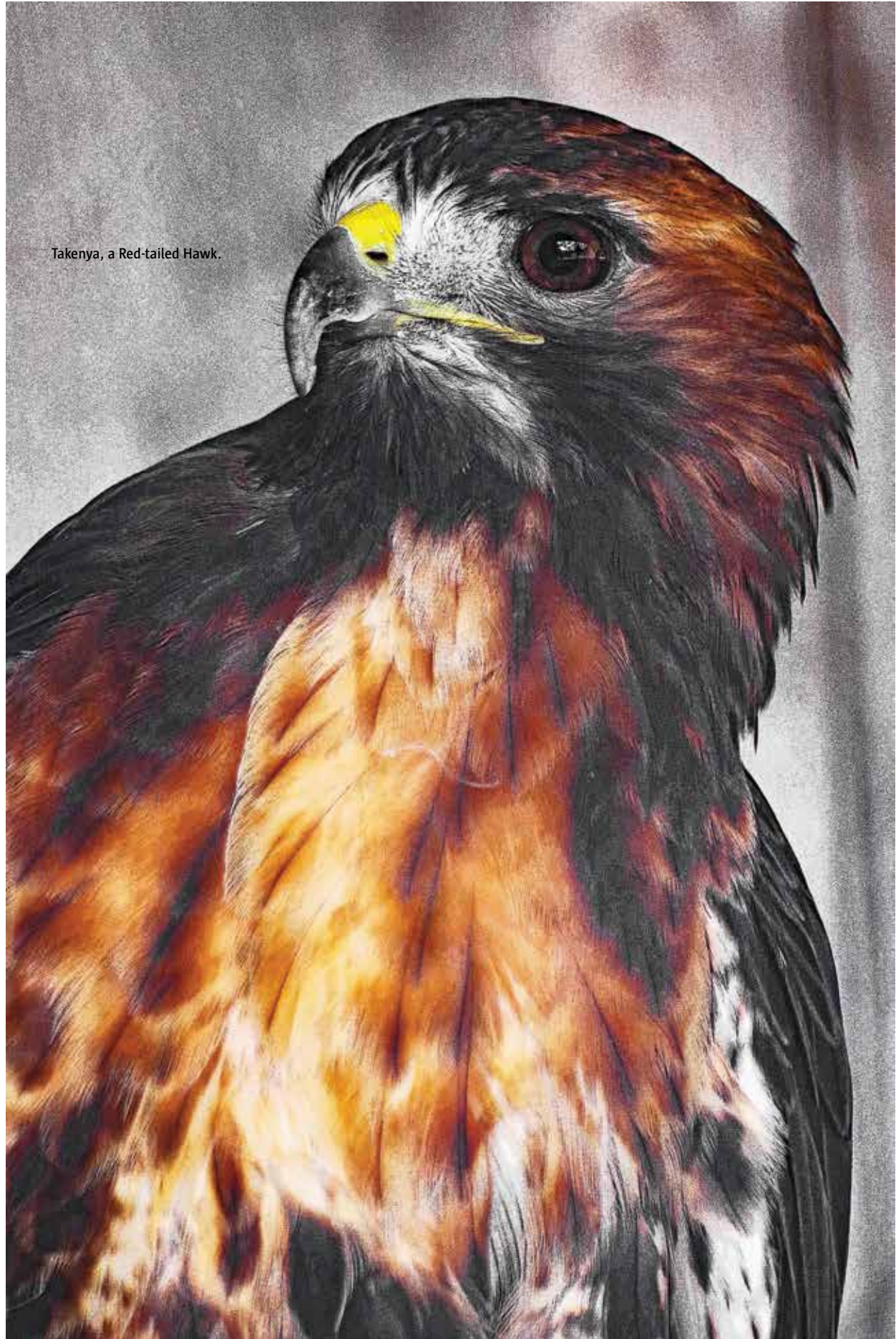
-  Wash your hands often with soap and water or alcohol-based hand sanitizer.
-  Cough or sneeze into your sleeve or a tissue. Dispose of tissue immediately and wash your hands.
-  Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth.
-  Keep surfaces clean and disinfected.
-  Avoid contact with people who are sick.
-  Stay home when you are sick.

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Takenya, a Red-tailed Hawk.

► Focus on Takenya's eye and beak.



with a plus and minus symbol (+-). If your first image is light, you need to reduce or subtract light in order to make the image darker by setting this control device to minus one (-1). Your next image should be darker. If the second image is still too light, try setting it to -1.3, -1.6 even -2. Continue this process until your images appear to be the correct exposure.

Successful Image

By following my instructions, you should be able to obtain many good and well-exposed images. Will they be keepers? That depends on many environmental factors and more importantly, how critical you want to be in your image sorting. I believe that the average person will look at a photo for two seconds and then go on to the next photo. I measure success by

the length of time someone looks at my photographs and I hope that it is longer than two seconds. The measurement of success increases when someone asks where or how did I take this photograph. It increases again if they call someone over to look at the photo. Regardless, the best measurement of success is, do you like your photograph?

I like the images that I am sharing in this article and I hope you do as well. **NEV**

Richard Rallon of Georgetown started teaching continuing education in photography at Humber College, then classes through the Peel and Halton Catholic school boards and Ontario Correctional Institute. He continues to share his love of photography while teaching at The Living Arts Centre in Mississauga.

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