



# The Raptor Chapter

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## ***We're seeing double at TRAC this summer!***

The 2003 summer internship was given in May to Peggy Hash of Tomado, an 18 year old graduate from St Albans High School on her way to Concord College in the Fall. No sooner had we let her know that she was accepted for the position than she shyly informed us that she had a twin sister and said, "We share everything. Can we share the internship too?" Well, what could we say? Thus Megan Hash was included (as soon as she could quit her summer job at a major retail store) and we have gotten twice the help and have had sayings like "It's all good" and "Rock on" happily tossed our way daily. To say they are enthusiastically interested is an understatement!

The twins have had the usual chores of keeping the hospital clean, feeding and caring for patients and education birds, working on raptor handling techniques, doing data entry and so on, but the work has been interspersed with road trips for education programs and learning to use construction power tools among other pursuits. They have been a big help here, and thanks to their hard work we are very close to being caught up on the majority of our workload here. This will enable us to focus on fundraising and grant writing a lot more this Fall and Winter.

As the newsletter was getting written, they offered to write something for it, and since they are twins, we are giving them two pages to say whatever they would like. Their essays can be found on pages 7 & 8 of this newsletter. We hope to continue working with Peggy and Megan as they continue through their college careers. Thanks for your hard work, you two!

### ***Migration Celebration 2003 a big success***

This year's Migration Celebration in May was a

bigger success than last year. Crowd estimates ranged from 650 to 700 individuals attending, including many children and their families. A sponsorship banner proclaimed this year's co-sponsors: Bank One, Jarrett & Foley DDS, Harvey's Fashions and Mountain State ENT & Facial Plastic Surgery Inc, whose additional funding made it possible to expand the event with more activities than before.

Activities, classes and displays were many and varied, and we wish to thank everyone who took the time and effort to make the event so special this year: the WV Dept. Of Natural Resources Wildlife Diversity Program, the National Park Service, Gary Rankin and John Hubbard, Randy Urian, Huntington/Tri-state Audubon Society, WV Dept of Agriculture Entomologist Terry Carrington, Granny Sue, Doug Harper, Shayar, No Strings Attached, Bob & Robin Worth, Kris Siuta, Mary Lepant & family, Bruce & Jeanne Brenneman, Ron Refsland, Mike & Judy McDade, and so many others! Photos from the 2003 Migration Celebration are on our web page - check them out: [ww.tracwv.org](http://ww.tracwv.org). Next year's Migration Celebration will be May 8, 2004.

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## Attention: Cat Owners SNAP OUT OF IT!!!

This summer has brought to TRAC many more cat bitten birds than ever before. We expected this to happen sooner or later as word spread of the Center's willingness to take in song birds as well as raptors. Everybody knows that cats kill birds and other wildlife, but what has surprised us is not how hard it is to save a bird bitten by a cat (and it's very tough) but how hard it is to get cat owners to take responsibility for the problem. So, to all the cat people out there (this includes me; Wendy and I have a neutered cat named George) here's the best information I can provide.

Next to habitat destruction, cats are the second largest contributing factor to the decline of birds around the world. In the U.S., there are over 73 million pet cats and an additional 60 to 100 million stray and feral cats. These animals have huge advantages over native wild predators. Being associated with humans, they are more likely to be protected from diseases, predation, competition, and starvation. Their numbers do not increase or decrease with prey populations like a wild predator. To compound the problem, cats differ from almost all other predators in that they hunt even when they aren't hungry. Its all play to them. Whenever studies have been done, even cats that never bring home "presents" are found to be serial killers, dispatching dozens of mammals and birds a night. Native rodents, those stereotyped mega-breeders, are at risk. In California, Deer Mice and Harvest Mice are in decline and being replaced with the non native House Mouse because of its habit of sponging off of untended cat and dog food bowls and human trash.

Unaltered cats are prolific breeders. In states with warm climates such as in WV, a female cat can have up to three litters per year with four to eight kittens per litter. Additionally, cats are not strictly territorial like most predatory animals. They can exist at much higher densities and may out-compete native predators - even raptors - for food. Only a few states have adequately studied the problem, but in Wisconsin, cat densities reach up to 114 per square mile.

Unvaccinated free-roaming cats can and do spread rabies, feline leukemia and distemper to each other and native wildlife. In fact cats are the most common carriers of rabies among all domestic animals. Even in so called "managed" cat colonies maintained by people sympathetic to

abandoned pet cats, the problems of disease, injuries due to fighting, and native wildlife depletion become unmanageable because these colonies tend to become target repositories for the further dumping of unwanted, pregnant, or diseased pets.

Globally, the response is taking shape. Australia and New Zealand have banned cats from coming into the country and are actively trying to extirpate them from wild lands. In the USA Hawaii, Florida, and California have passed aggressive legislation to manage the problem in their States. It would be a shame if West Virginia has to follow their lead just because we can't live up to our responsibilities as pet owners.

For people who like cats, the dilemma can be resolved only by taking responsibility for your pet and by doing the following:

1. Spay or neuter your cat. Just do it. They get over it just fine and so can you. They fight less, are healthier, tend to be happier and they don't breed at all.

2. Keep your cat indoors as much as possible and especially at night which is when cats do a preponderance of their killing. Cats can be happy as house pets. Helpful tips along this line are available on the web on the US Humane Society internet site and at "<http://www.abcbirds.org/cats/>".

3. Locate your bird feeders where there is no cover for a hunting cat (or other predator) and keep the grass cut low enough that ground-feeding birds can easily see the approach of a cat.

4. Don't dispose of unwanted cats by dumping them on your neighbors or booting them out into the woods. This is not "being kind", it is flat out cruel and irresponsible, and it puts the unasked for burden of doing something with the abandoned cat on someone else.

5. Don't feed feral or free-ranging cats out of pity. This just makes a bad situation worse. Cats clustering around a food source populate rapidly, suffer from disease and injury, destroy wildlife through predation and competition, and pose a disease threat to wildlife, your pets, and you.

These tips are provided by the Humane Society of the United States, the American Birding Association, National Audubon Society, Defenders of Wildlife, the USDA, wildlife rehabilitators and other concerned groups too numerous to fit in here.



Ron Perrone, TRAC Education Director



## Species Spotlight: Barn Owl

**Scientific Name:** *Tyto alba*

**Appearance:** a medium sized owl with no ear tufts, slender and linear in overall form. Back and upper side of wings are cinnamon colored with flecks of white, black and grey, underside can vary from white to cinnamon, breast is often flecked with dark grey. There are two phases (or morphs) within the species: the white-breasted, almost pure white underneath kind (like Twister in the picture above) and the darker orange-breasted phase, where the breast is a dark cinnamon similar to the back and wings. The darker phase also has more dark on the face as well, almost looking as if someone penciled in some extra strokes along the edges of the facial disk. Plumage variation seems to have nothing to do with age, sex or geographic locale. The long legs and toes are unfeathered.

**Common Name:** Barn Owl, Ghost Owl, Monkey-faced Owl, Orange Owl, Spirit Owl, Queen of the Night (really!), Stone Owl, Sweetheart Owl, White Owl.

**Size:** a little over 17 inches tall, wingspan of 42.7 inches, beak averages an inch long. Has an unusually long tarsus (the area on the leg just above the toes) measures on average 2.6 inches. Females are slightly larger than the males overall.

**Range:** North America, although this family of owls is widespread throughout the world numbering 17 species in all, and all look very similar to the ones we see in the US.

**Food Preferences:** almost exclusively rodents, although supplemental prey can include sparrows, starlings, frogs, moths, and lizards.

**Hunting Technique:** soaring about 10 feet off the ground over open habitat, uses hearing ability to locate prey, vision used mostly just for avoiding other objects.

**Habitat:** Can be found nesting and roosting on high ledges in barns, stone walls, silos, farm outbuildings, abandoned or empty houses, water towers, belfries, mine shafts, large tree cavities, institutional buildings, granaries, quarries, or even under roadway or railroad bridges (and that's the short list!) Barn owl nests have also been found in tunnels they have excavated in a tall steep stream banks. They like to have an open area to hunt in such as an orchard, field or large clearing.

**Nesting:** 5 - 7 eggs, female does most of the brooding, male brings food. Incubation lasts 30 - 34 days, young are hatched out semi-downy, immobile and eyes are closed. Fully fledged out in 52 - 56 days.

**Habits:** strongly nocturnal, which often keeps them from being seen by humans. They become active starting at sundown, however if they have chicks in the nest they will also hunt during the day to keep up with food demands of the babies. A nest or roost site is most often identified first by the "whitewash" or urates below the area. Permanent resident year round.

**Status:** uncertain of populations in WV, declining slowly around the US. Reintroduction programs have been unsuccessful, primarily due to loss of prey base from pesticide use and intensive farming techniques.

### **NOTES:**

The WV Dept. of Natural Resources is currently trying to determine roughly how many barn owls are in WV. Many farmers are interested in having these owls nest on their property because a single barn owl can capture and kill over 21 rodents in just a ½ hour of a night's hunting. If you have barn owls in your area, you can participate in the data gathering for the study: just call WV DNR Biologist Kieran O'Malley at 304-822-3551 and let him know. "We need help locating owls because their habitat exists mostly on farms and private land", says O'Malley. Young barn owls are just getting out and flying about now, so keep your eyes open!



### **Patient Update**

We are ahead of last year's intake already, with 120 patients turned in so far. A lot of young and baby birds have been showing up with cat bite injuries which are hard to turn around; this has resulted in numerous deaths despite day and night nursing and is very depressing and hard on morale after a while.

We have had some very interesting birds and cases come in though. First of all, we had a northern waterthrush turned in (cat bite) from Sandstone in Summers County. Although we could not save it, at least we got to see one of these unusual warblers close up. Right now we are also nursing a young barn owl from Lewisburg. He is an orange-breasted morph with a dislocated elbow that will make him unable to fly again. We are sending a request to the US Fish & Wildlife Service for permission to keep him as an educational bird.

Holly and Allen Canfield, who were our interns during 2002 have been working on setting up an intake and triage point for TRAC in Buckhannon, and the word has been spreading. Since the beginning of the year they have worked with 26 patients, some of which they were able to nurse and release from their "triage clinic" and some of which had to be transported down to TRAC for intensive care. Of particular note was a lead poisoned red-tailed hawk that another 2002 intern, Carole Pollock in Davis, WV, was able to save. Carole met Holly and Allen who stabilized the bird then transported it to us for weeks of intense nursing. Thanks to a very effective protocol prescribed by our staff vet Dr Bill Streit, the bird is now flying free again over Parsons in Tucker County.

Another interesting case included our first Merlin, who flew into a carport while hunting in the Canaan Valley area and sprained it's

shoulder. That was another great coordination between the WV Dept of Natural Resources in Elkins, Holly and Allen and TRAC. Both the Merlin and the Red Tail were released back to their respective areas on the same day - what a show! As an added bonus, while the Merlin was recuperating here in a flight cage, Ron was able to record the territorial calls of 3 falcons yelling all at once: Apex our American Kestrel, the Merlin, and Perry our Peregrine Falcon.

Right now as I write this a pileated woodpecker fledgling is pounding away on his cardboard box on the porch, healing up from being attacked by dogs. A hummingbird just flew past my window and I wonder if it is the one we were able to release last week that had been caught by a cat. THAT release was a major joy; not only were we able to release a hummingbird (which are always tricky to work with) but it was one of the few cases we were able to turn around from a cat bite injury.

Currently care for our patients is getting to be very difficult tho, along with being able to go out to present our educational programs. Donations to the Center have fallen off by over \$13,000 this year, and I just used our last \$50 donation to purchase meal worms to feed the pileated woodpecker. The newsletter mailing is being delayed until we can find the \$300 we need to buy stamps, and on it goes. We have gone through tough financial times before, but the reserves used to tide us over then were never able to be replenished so the Center is very much in need of immediate funding. On that note, please read on:

### **Art Auction to benefit TRAC in October**

Mountain State University in Beckley has agreed to co-sponsor an art auction to benefit TRAC on October 24th, 2003. The event will be held in MSU's Convocation Center. We hope to raise \$20,000 at the event and are asking any artists who wish to donate artwork to please get in touch with either Dr. Cheryl Melkonian (at 304-763-4553) or Wendy or Ron Perrone at TRAC (1-800-721-5252 in WV, or 304-466-4683 outside WV state lines.) More info on the event can be found on our Internet website: [www.tracwv.org/artauction2003](http://www.tracwv.org/artauction2003). See you there!



## We've lost Luther, our Great Horned Owl

On June 19, Luther, our great horned owl, died very suddenly. We had gone to do a program at Elk Elementary Center in Charleston, WV. When we opened the van and unloaded the cages in front of him, Ron saw Luther on the floor of his cage and called me over. I took Luther and quickly drove to Dr. Sarah Stephenson's Good Shepherd Veterinary Hospital just down the road. Luther died in my arms as I ran through the Hospital's front door.

The final diagnosis was that he died of an aneurysm, which is when the an artery to the heart suddenly enlarges and the blood pools into a sac. In Luther's case the sac was created and ruptured immediately without any advance warning. He was perfectly normal when we got him ready to travel and was fine during transit - no indications at all of any trouble. Our solace is that at least he didn't suffer more than a few minutes and that his death was very rapid. We miss him terribly. -wp

## West Nile Virus Found Again in WV

According to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, there has been a positive test for West Nile Virus in a robin from Greenbrier County in mid June. Other preliminary tests show positives in Ohio, Wood and Morgan counties, although we could not find out what species those test results were for by the time this newsletter went to press.



The best way to keep from getting West Nile Virus is to limit your exposure to mosquitos. Some

simple things to do include 1) wear a mosquito repellent that contains at least 25% DEET, 2) remove all standing stagnant water from around your living area. This includes eliminating old tires and broken toys, and clean out your bird baths and pet bowls 2 - 3 times weekly then refill them with fresh water. Remember to empty out the catchpans for your outdoor flower pots too. 3) treat your bird baths, fish ponds, animal watering devices, swimming pools, etc with "Mosquito Dunks", a bacteria called BTI that kills only the mosquito larvae that grow into mosquitos that can transmit West Nile Virus. These mosquito dunks are harmless to everything and everyone else, and one "Dunk" can treat 100 sq feet of water for 30 days. "Dunks" can also be broken up into smaller pieces to treat smaller bodies of water.

According to test results coming out of Europe, who has been dealing with West Nile longer than we have, spraying for mosquitos has actually pushed all mosquito species to develop a much stronger resistance to common insecticides. On the positive side, other tests are showing that birds are developing a resistance to West Nile, and that a mother bird's immunity can be spread to her chicks as they are being formed in the egg.

For a lot more information on West Nile Virus, check out the following Internet web sites:

[www.tracwv.org/wnv1.htm](http://www.tracwv.org/wnv1.htm) - information and links for other great sites

<http://westnilevirus.nbii.gov> - what it is, where it is, history & a lot of very good information.

[www.wvdhhr.org](http://www.wvdhhr.org) - Bird testing reports for West Nile Virus in WV [www.baesg.org/westnile.htm](http://www.baesg.org/westnile.htm) - an extensive and current page of links to information.

Statistically, a person's risk of contracting West Nile is very low. In most areas where the virus is established, only 1% of the area's mosquitoes carry the virus. Less than 1% of people bitten by these infected mosquitoes develop serious complications from the virus; the remainder exhibit flu-like symptoms, or no symptoms at all. Those at highest risk are the elderly and people with weakened immune systems; it is important tho for all people to protect themselves from mosquito bites to minimize the risk of infection.

## Peggy Hash



Early in May of this year, I leapt at the phone and at the chance to spend my summer as an intern at Three Rivers Avian Center. After an introduction to the center and the work involved, I was (thankfully) accepted and began my internship on June 5th. As a young teenager, I'd seen one of TRAC's programs at the local library which channeled my interest in birds toward a valuable cause. Conservation had always been an area of interest for me...and now I had found an outlet for it - and all without Algebra 2! It is thanks to the initiative of my senior-year biology teacher, with whom I shared this aspiration some six years after seeing TRAC's "WV Birds of Prey" program, I finally got connected.

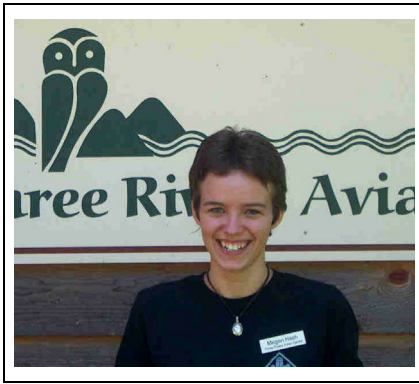
The perks of the job are obvious. Living and working around the stammer-inducing elegance of raptors is a pleasure and a privilege, not to mention an opportunity I could not pass up. I get to interact at eye-level with what many people see only as a print in a field guide or as an indiscernible speck in the sky. The release of a patient evokes the sort of elation you would imagine, but on a scale I cannot describe except to say it is a singular joy one can derive from no other source.

At the other end of the spectrum, the pain or death of a patient inflicts on me the opposite but equal emotional response. Both pain and death are a jolt to the eyes and a shock to the heart, but they are an inevitability one must expect and prepare for. In my mind however, these negatives do not give me reason to quit. In fact, they are the only reason to continue. No other aspect of the job is as hard, physical or emotional. (By the way, as daunting as "rat detail" may understandably seem to some, I like to say it is not nearly as discouraging as the horrors that most other teenagers and I have encountered working in the fast-food industry!)

In addition to the daily tasks at the Center, Megan and I also experience a broader range of activity and horizons. Chip, TRAC's broadwing hawk, and Ginger, a long-eared owl, immediately come to mind. Hopefully you've already met Chip, whom I speak about at programs. She has so far been the ideal glove-bird, usually so well behaved that despite her beak and talons never being far from my mind, I mentally depended on her during my first few programs. "We're up here together, Chip." Ginger, on the other hand, is also a pleasure, but for a different reason—the fact that she is more difficult. Admittedly, I do enjoy a challenge, but also no one is more qualified than Ginger to teach me how to untwist jesses, cope with launching birds, and balled feet (a tactic raptors use to reject the glove by clenching their talons in a closed fist and opting to roll off the glove and swing upside-down by the tether), as well as how to perfect the "butt-grab" (a harmless yet rapid technique I use to correct the latter two stunts).

It's safe to say that hands-on learning is an everyday exercise here at TRAC. There is also much to say for the scientific literature I now have access to, as well as the wealth of expertise the Perrones are willing to share with me, ranging from ornithology, biology, and ecology, to power tools, public speaking, and avian first-aid.

In the three months I've spent trailblazing around West Virginia doing programs, I've seen more of the State than I've ever known in my eighteen years. If I didn't already know better, I would not have guessed the peaks and valleys to belong to my native State. But above all, what satisfies me the most is that I am working for an important purpose. Birds of prey deserve their place in West Virginia in their own right, and after speaking to a myriad of enthusiastic individuals around the State, I'm relieved that I'm not the only one who wants them here. I'm grateful for the opportunity to actively counteract the threats to our native avian wildlife and to contribute to West Virginia's ecological diversity rather than sitting still, shaking my head and throwing my hands up at the dire statistics I know we've all read. These birds are easily nature's most impressive testament to evolution. I'm glad to be a part of making sure they will be here for generations to come.



## **MEGAN** **HASH**

Whomp! A blunt, high speed object hits my living room window and disappears into the front yard. My two sisters, older brother and I stampede out into the lawn to investigate. After a few moments of investigation, our posse discovers an olive-green bird lying seemingly comatose in the grass. The rescue squad springs into action. Someone stands guard over the patient while another one of us chases away the family cat. Meanwhile, I bound into the garage/laundry room to retrieve a pair of old underwear that we use to transport our patient into an antique bird cage to protect it from our strictly “outside cat”. We wait and watch. After a while there is a twitch. Then in an instant, he shoots himself skyward, his soft green head protruding through the bars. He has red eyes. Fearing he might injure himself, we open the cage door to let him fly out the front but after a few panicky moments, the little creature indignantly pushes himself through the bars and into a nearby tree. With mixed feelings of wonder and relief, I gawk at him until he flits out of sight. Lasting about ten minutes, this was my first, albeit brief experience in avian rehab.

Even though that was almost ten years ago, I find myself experiencing similar sentiments now that I am involved with professional avian rehabilitation. I feel the same fascination with being THIS CLOSE to a real live wild animal, the same simultaneous feeling of attachment and relief when it flies away. The big difference is that the tiny red-eyed vireo has now incarnated itself into three screech owls, a barred owl, an army of American kestrels, and several other varieties of raptor. In the past couple of months, I have held, wrangled, and even been wing-whacked by birds I never thought I would see.

I have read before that even educated people once assumed wild animals to be nothing more than vapid, non-sentient vessels of impulse. Apparently these people didn't spend much time around their object of study. In the past two months at Three Rivers Avian Center, I'm sure I have observed behavior in raptors that can be interpreted in no other

way but comradery, playfulness, and even manipulation.

My internship at TRAC has furthermore provided me with plenty of skills I was never taught in high school. In addition to lessons in ornithology and taxonomy, I can now claim at least some experience in lawn mowing, deck building, and four-wheeling...not to mention the inexplicable joy that is post-hole digging. (Insert sarcasm here.) However, I am happy to say that life at TRAC hasn't been all work and no play. Not only have I had a free tour of much of the state, but I have also had the opportunity to be introduced to an entire community of gifted, highly likeable and diverse people. In addition to that, nearly everyone I've met, on the road or otherwise, fully aware I'm not even nineteen yet, has regarded me with sincere, friendly, and non-stereotyped interest.

As anyone who has visited would know, Brooks Mountain is certainly a tribute to the environmental community. TRAC and its surrounding area on the top of the Mountain is a bird-watcher's paradise too. Just since last night, I have seen a wild barred owl, towhees, cedar-waxwings, blue jays, one hooded warbler, ruby-throated hummingbirds, several American goldfinches, an onslaught of Northern cardinals and a downy woodpecker.

Because of the endless menagerie of green, feathered, and furry life here, I imagine that Three Rivers Avian Center could get anyone enthusiastic about protecting the environment and wildlife. Equally important, this is a place that also gives people an outlet to do so. In addition to providing empowering information to the public about conservation, the internship that TRAC offers is an effective way of simultaneously educating future professionals while making a contribution. Before now, the sole merit of education in my life has been to know something now in order to get something later. Working for Three Rivers Avian Center has been my most rewarding endeavor so far because ironically, the goal is to give something back.

# Many Thanks to our Sponsors:

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