



FOR THE BIRDS

Iowa Raptor Project director aims to have programs flying high soon

By Carrie Campbell, for The Gazette — Photos by Rebecca F. Miller, The Gazette



Since joining the Iowa Raptor Project in March, Director Ryan Anthony has had to rewrite the book on the program — literally.

The center, normally open 365 days a year to the public, closed shortly after Anthony started his job because of the statewide coronavirus shutdown. While the outdoor areas are now open, Anthony is still figuring out how things will work when the center completely reopens for visitors, staff and volunteers.

Reopening the center — near Lake Macbride State Park — also will require a readjustment on the part of the birds.

"Some of them have been a little bit calmer. Some are more skittish birds, and they don't like people as much, especially crowds of people," said Anthony, 35, of Solon.

"But some of them, like our little screech owl that we have, he's not used to people now as much. He hasn't seen people in a couple

OPPOSITE PAGE: A barn owl is one of 16 birds that live on the grounds of the Iowa Raptor Project near Solon. Either because of an injury or another limitation, each bird of prey cannot be released back into the wild.

ABOVE: Director Ryan Anthony holds an American kestrel at the Iowa Raptor Project at the Macbride Nature Recreation Area near Solon.

of months. When we go in there, he jumps around, and normally he used to be calm and we could go pick him up. So some are kind of backsliding a little."

Anthony's love of birds began at an early age, growing up with chickens and parrots. He became a migratory bird biologist with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the Quad Cities, until the director's job became available at the Iowa Raptor Project.

"My wife and I, we're both master falconers and just always had an interest in raptors," Anthony said.

While in the past, the project — a joint partnership between the University of Iowa and Kirkwood Community College — has focused on taking care of several injured birds of prey that couldn't be released, Anthony's goal is to create more opportunities for education, outreach and research.

"We're a higher education institution, and the majority of the program is supported by the university, so we would like to provide opportunities to our students and Kirkwood students as well to learn, to grow, be able to do research, and be able to do education and outreach," he said. "That is our mission, connecting students to raptors."

The center, in addition to doing its own research, can provide students with equipment and training, such as how to trap raptors or how to take tissue or blood samples from the birds.

With his experience as a master falconer, Anthony is expanding the training of the birds.

"Previously, all they did was hold the birds on the glove. That was the extent of the training. Now we're training some birds to free fly outside of our area," Anthony said. "The hope is to do some free-flighted programs in the future."

"The one bald eagle we have, we're thinking about using him for programs as well. He's pretty skittish right now. I really am considering just putting a cot in his mews (or enclosure) and



Zorro, a gyrfalcon that normally nests in the Arctic tundra, is seen at the Iowa Raptor Project near Solon.



The Iowa Raptor Project houses 16 birds of prey that can't be released back into the wild, including a red-tailed hawk (top), a screech owl (left) and a turkey vulture (above). Visitors can walk around the outdoor enclosures every day. Guided tours are available for a small fee.



ABOVE: Iowa Raptor Project Director Ryan Anthony holds his daughter, Merlin, 1, as his wife and Assistant Director Holly Anthony holds a gyrfalcon named Zorro.

RIGHT: A turkey vulture airs out its wings in the sun at the Iowa Raptor Project.

OPPOSITE PAGE: The Iowa Raptor Project has one bald eagle that you can see by touring the outdoor enclosures near Solon.



spending a couple days there (to build trust)."

While the raptor center is usually open daily for outdoor self-guided tours of the enclosures, it also hosts Family Day programs once a month for the opportunity to see the birds up close.

During a regular year, staff also bring the raptors to schools or teach classes for programs like School of the Wild, a one-week environmental program offered for elementary and middle school students through the University of Iowa.

Many of the birds at the Iowa Raptor Project are on the upper end of their species' lifespan. None can be released into the wild again, either because of physical handicaps or because they have imprinted on people, thinking they are more of a person than a bird.

The center's turkey vulture, for example, was found on the roadside in the winter 30 years ago with her wings clipped.

"So we think somebody had raised her and was just kind of illegally keeping her and finally got tired of her," Anthony said. "So she was an imprint."

The Iowa Raptor Project currently has two red-tailed hawks, two bald eagles, three American kestrels, a barred owl, two great-horned owls, a barn owl, a Harris hawk, two gyrfalcons, a turkey vulture and a screech owl. An older peregrine falcon died in early June, but Anthony hopes to get a new one soon — one for the center and one for his family.

"I do have an eagle permit, but I don't have an eagle of my own — yet,"

Anthony said.

He and his wife, Holly, love raptors so much, they named their young daughter Merlin, after a species of smaller falcon.

The Iowa Raptor Project is located at 2095 Mehaffey Bridge Rd. NE, Solon.

To learn more, go online to recserv.uiowa.edu/iowaraptorproject or call (319) 624-7178.



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