

# REPAIRING RAPTORS

Story by Raymond Fox



## UC Davis' California Raptor Center Serves as an Avian Oasis for Wounded Birds of Prey

On the fringe of the University of California, Davis' south campus stands a collection of ramshackle structures tucked away on a forgotten parcel of farmland. Away from most of the school's more traditional academic touchstones, the air here comes alive with the cries of birds: the shrill calls of red-shouldered hawks mingle with those of golden eagles, occasionally interrupted by the wail of a passing freight train. Adorning the side of a weather-beaten barn, the image of a soaring eagle welcomes the morning sun and visitors alike.

This is the California Raptor Center, a haven for ill and injured birds of prey. For the past 40 years, raptors of all shapes and sizes, from the diminutive American kestrel to the stately bald eagle, have received expert veterinary care here as they recover from disease, poisonings, gunshot wounds and more exotic injuries like collisions with the massive blades spinning on wind turbines.

As its name implies, the California Raptor Center exclusively treats raptors. According to a California Department of Fish and Wildlife study, *A Plan for California Raptors* by Robert D. Mallette and Ronald W. Schlorff, "Thirty-seven species may be found in California, either as migrants or as residents."

And, according to Dr. Michelle Hawkins, director of the Center, of those 37 raptor species, they regularly see many that are on both the fully protected and endangered lists, including golden eagles, white-tailed kites and Swainson's hawks.

"We have a range of species so people can come in and learn about them," says Hawkins. "Our goals here are to help these birds but also to help people learn about them and understand how we impact their environment—that's a big part of our message."

Just inside the Center's entrance stands a small



structure that houses a pair of golden eagles—Aquila, who arrived in 1982 with a gunshot wound, and Fuzzy, a survivor of a collision with a wind turbine at Altamont Pass. Aquila is the Center’s longest living resident and Hawkins calls her a good ambassador. “She greets everybody as they come through the door,” she says.

Hawkins is just finishing her first year as director, overseeing a dedicated team of veterinarians, undergraduate students and volunteers. They operate on a minimal budget to return these injured birds to good health and, ideally, back to the wild. Every year, the Center receives from 250 to 350 birds. As in most trauma/rehab facilities, the first 24 hours are the most critical. The Center’s workers are proud that 60 percent to 70 percent of the survivors are released back into the wild.

Those who work with the recovering birds are careful to fully shield them from any public exposure. “We rehabilitate these birds with the least amount of contact with humans as possible,” says Hawkins.

She said once a bird arrives at the Center, the clock starts ticking. “There are some birds that we try to rehabilitate very quickly and get them back out into the world so that they don’t cause harm to themselves while they’re in a small space.”

During the rehabilitation, birds can remain at the Center from six weeks to a year, always depending on the nature and severity of the injury. But while the Center’s goal is to restore and release these birds, not every patient recovers fully. Some of the birds have sustained injuries that would prevent them from being released because it would amount to a death sentence. So a portion will wind up as permanent residents. “Our resolution is to never release a bird that we don’t 100 percent believe is going to make it out there,” Hawkins says.

The California Raptor Center maintains up to 40 non-releasable resident birds. It allows the Center’s veterinarians and undergraduates to examine each bird on an annual basis, conduct full physicals with blood work and administer radiographs when needed. Experts on West Nile Virus will administer vaccines. Because of the level of care provided, the Center sees few diseases associated with captivity of birds of prey. It’s something of which the



## Fine Feathered Friends

The California Raptor Center’s Adopt-a-Bird program helps finance the care and feeding of its raptor residents. Contributors receive an adoption package containing a photo of the bird, its history and an informal invitation to visit the bird at the Center. Adoption packages are tailored to fit any budget: a contribution of \$50 will adopt Annie the American kestrel for a year, while Fuzzy the golden eagle’s adoption package is \$100. Or adopt the entire nursery for \$150. Twenty birds are available for adoption on the Center’s website at [www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/calraptor/meet\\_our\\_residents](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/calraptor/meet_our_residents).

The California Raptor Center is open to the public from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m., Monday through Friday. Visitors are welcome to take a self-guided stroll through the grounds or schedule a guided tour or offsite presentation by calling (530) 752-9994. The Center welcomes new volunteers as well as contributions. For more information, visit their website at [www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/calraptor](http://www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu/calraptor).



Emblazoned with depictions of eagles and owls, an old barn (upper left) on the south edge of the University of California, Davis serves as part of the California Raptor Center. The barn stood at this location before the center moved here 40 years ago, and now welcomes visitors with its enlarged portrayal of birds of prey, like the ones treated by the veterinary staff. The director of the center hopes one day to replace the barn with a modern interpretive center but understands budgetary realities will delay that advancement for a few years. Above, Spar, left, and Annie are two American kestrels that were treated at the center for injuries. Both were imprinted by humans during their recovery, which left them unable to survive in the wild. They have become permanent residents at the center. Spar is coming up on his 10th anniversary at the center while Annie marks her sixth. At left, another permanent resident at the center is Sullivan, a golden eagle that has been here since 2012. When Sullivan first arrived, he appeared malnourished and had an injured wing. The veterinary staff at the center mended his wing and brought him back from his emaciated condition, but his injuries left him no chance of surviving in the wild so he now serves as one of the ambassador to help educate visitors.





This golden eagle, left, nears completion of treatment after several months. Considering the condition it arrived in, the raptor made a remarkable recovery, according to Dr. Michelle Hawkins, the director of the California Raptor Center. The eagle arrived at the center emaciated and nearly featherless, suffering from a mysterious case of mange. In cases regarding avian disease and mortality, the Center will contact environmental scientists with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. In this particular case, it was determined that the eagle's mange was caused by a debilitating mite.

staff remains understandably proud.

Some permanent residents become educational ambassadors for the Center. Only the most even-tempered, people-friendly raptors make that grade because they provide the up-close and personal encounters.

One of those ambassadors is a Swainson's hawk named Grasshopper. Swainson's hawks were listed as a threatened species in 1983 by the California Fish and Game Commission, and Grasshopper personifies the plight of the birds that find themselves at the Center. According to the CDFW's *California Swainson's Hawk Inventory: 2005-2006*, "Human population increases and projected urbanization in Swainson's hawk habitat in California continues to place the Swainson's hawk at the heart of development controversies." In 2006, Grasshopper received surgery for cataracts. The operation helped, but did not solve the problem and his vision remained impaired.

"He's been an absolutely amazing ambassador for us," says Hawkins. "The kids love him. He's very good at telling our stories."

"Rehabilitation is our No. 1 mission, but teaching and education are the other key components to why we're here," Hawkins says.

In 2013, about 1,200 elementary

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Dr. Michelle Hawkins  
Director of the California Raptor Center

school students visited the Center and roughly the same numbers were visited at their schools via outreach efforts. "We have all these wonderful specimens that kids get to touch and feel. They actually get to touch an eagle's foot," Hawkins says with a smile. "It's stunning to see the look on their faces when they're touching these things. It's as real as it ever gets for them."

CDFW works effectively with operations like the Center to identify potentially critical problems early on. Krysta Rogers is an environmental scientist with CDFW, operating out of the Wildlife Investigations Lab where she is the lead investigator of avian disease and mortality. After receiving back-to-back reports of mange-ridden golden eagles, Rogers collaborated with the Center to determine whether an avian health issue was surfacing in California.

"It's a good resource to investigate causes of mortality including disease and contaminants," Rogers says about the Center. "And it's nice having the association with the UC Davis veterinary hospital as

well. There are a lot of different types of expertise that can be consulted."

It was eventually determined that the golden eagle's mange was caused by a debilitating mite. The investigation found the mite was normally present on pet birds, not raptors. Officials consider it a small

problem now but are aware it could grow into something bigger later. The idea is to catch potential emerging diseases early on so an alert can be raised if necessary. Hawkins ultimately collaborated on a publication exploring the cause of the mange and anticipates further opportunities to combine expertise and resources in the future.

Stretching her wings in the Center's 50-foot flight enclosure is a golden eagle recovering from this mysterious mite infestation. When she arrived at the Center, she was debilitated and emaciated, lacking feathers on most of her body. After six months of care from the Center's skilled team, she has made a remarkable recovery. With a little luck, she'll soon be released back into the wild, close to where she was initially found. 🐾

Ray Fox is a freelance writer who lives in the Sacramento area. This is the first time he has written for Outdoor California.

# 2014 California Wildlife PHOTO OF THE YEAR CONTEST

Contest Dates Jan. 1, 2014 - Dec. 31, 2014

You are invited to submit your very best photos of California wildlife

Here's how: Visit [CAWatchableWildlife.org/photos](http://CAWatchableWildlife.org/photos) for submission & entry guidelines. All entries must be submitted online.

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- Images taken in the Sierra Nevada
- Any California wildlife species
- Wildlife in native habitat
- People viewing wildlife
- Interesting animal behavior
- Seasonal abundance of wildlife

The 2014 contest is presented by California Watchable Wildlife and *Outdoor California*, and sponsored by Sierra Nevada Conservancy.

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