

THE BIRDS of PREY PROGRAM

By Neal McLain

Birds of prey are birds that hunt for food primarily on the wing, using their keen senses, especially vision. They are defined as any bird that hunts other animals. Their talons and beaks tend to be relatively large, powerful and adapted for tearing and/or piercing flesh. In most cases, the females are considerably larger than the males. The term "raptor" is derived from the Latin word "rapere" (meaning to seize or take by force).

—Wikipedia [1]

EarthQuest is a non-profit environmental education organization, dedicated to the education of the public as to their impact on the natural world. The concept for EarthQuest began in the Spring of 1989 as an idea to educate the general public about wildlife through the presentation of live animals in an entertaining format.

—EarthQuest [2]

Every year during March and April, EarthQuest brings the *Birds of Prey* program to Brazoria County for a few weeks before Migration Celebration. During these weeks, EarthQuest's wildlife handlers present *Birds of Prey* in a variety of venues including schools, service clubs, and shopping malls.

Birds of Prey shows have been presented at Brazoria County schools every year since 2003 in cooperation with Friends of the Brazoria Wildlife Refuges, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and local sponsors. TMN-COT member Phil Huxford has been the driving force behind these shows, and he often serves as a sort of Master of Ceremonies.

By April 15, when this year's series of school shows ends, EarthQuest will have presented 31 school shows in the Alvin, Angleton, Bay City, Brazosport, Columbia-Brazoria, Damon, Danbury, Sweeny, and Van Vleck School Districts, reaching a total audience of over 15,000 students and teachers.

This year's school show sponsors include ConocoPhillips, other local businesses, school PTOs, and individual donors.



EarthQuest Master Falconer Steve Hoddy at a public demonstration at Pearland Town Center, April 2010.

The *Birds of Prey* program culminates at Migration Celebration. This year, Migration Celebration is presenting four *Birds of Prey* shows at the main Migration Celebration campus at San Bernard National Wildlife Refuge. These shows are open to the public without charge. Here's the schedule:

- Saturday at 9:30 AM and 4:30 PM
- Sunday at 1:30 PM and 3:30 PM.

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Here are some photos of a recent *Birds of Prey* school show at Angleton's Southside Elementary School. The entire student body attended this show.



TMN-COT Volunteer Phil Huxford warms up the crowd.



EarthQuest handler Steve Hody with Utah, a Ferruginous Hawk,



Horton, the Great Horned Owl.

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Igor the Vulture drew a big round of applause when he took off and flew straight toward Phil.



Storm, the Andean Condor, shows off her ten-foot wingspan and her handsome plumage.

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Renegade, a Peregrine Falcon. Renegade is sometimes allowed to fly free during *Birds of Prey* Shows. He hunts on the wing and (usually) returns to Steve when Steve calls.



But Renegade was a naughty boy today. When Steve released him to fly free, he flew over the school roof and out of sight. A few minutes later, we saw him circling high overhead.

Steve tracked him by radio so he knew that Renegade wasn't far away. Eventually, Steve spotted him on a nearby water tower. Steve called him, and Renegade came right back to his cage. Good boy, Renegade!

The photo shows Phil and Steve tracking Renegade with radio tracking equipment.

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After-class Q&A

As this photo makes clear, Phil is immensely proud of the *Birds of Prey* school program.

[1] Wikipedia contributors. "Bird of prey." *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 8 April 2010. Accessed 11 April 2010. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Birds_of_prey>.

[2] EarthQuest. "About EarthQuest." 2008. Accessed 11 April 2010. <<http://www.earthquest.org/index.html>>.