



Southern Nevada WILD

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The Southern Nevada Wild newsletter for educators and students can be found at www.ndow.org/learn/programs/region/south/index.shtm.

Falconry

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Falconry is ancient sport that has been practiced since about 4000 B.C. and has its origins in the Middle East or Asia. Keeping a bird of prey (usually a falcon) began as a way of hunting for food. Raptors, or hunting birds, are skilled at chasing down prey animals, such as rabbits, squirrels and others. In order to get the birds to bring the animals back to you, they have to be trained. This requires a lot of time, money, and hard work – so it takes a very special person to be a falconer.



Falconer Oscar Ruiz

The most important thing to know is that the birds are not kept as pets. The falconer needs to provide special housing, called a “mew,” with water, misters, fences, and temperature controls. The birds need to be tended to daily, especially when they are molting, which is a stressful time for them. If they experience too much stress, they may develop “fret marks” on their feathers, which can affect their ability to fly. The old saying, “don’t fret,” is actually a falconry term.


After the molt, the falconer needs to provide regular opportunities for the birds to hunt.

Birds are flown from about 4:30 to 8:00 a.m. every day during the open hunting season. Jackrabbit season is year-round in Nevada, and they are hunted by falconers throughout the fall and winter. Goshawks, Harris hawks and red-tailed hawks are the most popular birds used for these hunts. Ducks can be hunted up until February and are pursued by peregrine falcons and their hybrids.

Hunting involves driving to a place where wild game is plentiful and where the raptors have open areas to pursue it. This could be a good distance away. Falconers use verbal cues along with equipment such as leashes, jesses, hoods, gloves, swivels, and bells to send their birds off after animals. The work is not done when the bird finds its prey. Often falconers have to hike long distances to retrieve their bird, which sits with its prey where it was taken. The raptor does not immediately eat the game it hunts. The success rate for falconry hunts is usually around 30 percent. Some falconers may also fly birds strictly for recreation. American kestrels, because of their small size, cannot be used to pursue most upland game. Micro-hawking is the art of sending these smaller birds after small mammals and birds, and even dragonflies and other insects.

If you’re thinking about getting a falconry license, it’s not easy. The first thing you need to do is get a sponsor, who is a practiced falconer. Then you need to pass an exam from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service on bird biology, bird behavior and how to keep a bird. You will need to shadow other falconers before you can practice flying with a bird. After that, you can obtain your own bird, with the proper permits from the wildlife agencies. The practice of falconry requires a hunting license, a falconry license or “raptor permit” (both state and federal) and authorized bird bands. It takes two years as an apprentice before you can become a general falconer, and five years after that to become a master falconer. Although there is no official falconry club here, the 15 to 20 falconers in southern Nevada do gather together for events and sharing. You can also get information from the North American Falconers Association.

I am the eagle, I live in high country, in rocky cathedrals that reach to the sky; I am the hawk and there's blood on my feathers, but time is still turning they soon will be dry; All those who see me, and all who believe in me, share in the freedom I feel when I fly.



- John Denver



Peregrine Falcon

What is the fastest bird on the planet? It's the peregrine falcon, and it lives right here in Nevada, as well as across North America and around the world. Peregrines hunt for birds and small mammals as well as insects. Watching from a perch high atop a cliff or hotel roof, they will dive at up to 200 miles per hour, so fast that they knock their prey unconscious when they hit them. In Las Vegas, the falcons serve as a natural pest control, hunting pigeons around town. The interesting part about this predator - prey relationship is that the pigeon is one bird that can out fly the peregrine in distance, if not in speed. Peregrines also hunt bats around the Las Vegas Strip, where the bats feed on insects drawn to the many neon lights.

These amazing birds are bluish-gray on top and a buff color underneath, with black on the head like a helmet, and a white neck. They stand between 13 and 19 inches tall, with a wingspan of up to 40 inches, and weigh about one and a half pounds. They have a fairly short tail. Truly regal animals, they are one of the raptor species used in falconry, and can live up to 20 years with a falconer. In the wild, where they are exposed to climate, disease and



Photo by Christy Klinger, NDOW

injury, their life span is shorter. Peregrines prefer sites with cliffs, occasionally substituting a tall building ledge for a cliff. There they make a **scrape**, which is a lightly lined depression in the rock, instead of building a nest. They mate for life, producing two to four chicks that are ready to leave the nest after about six weeks.

The peregrine falcon was on the endangered species list for a number of years, but it's on the rebound in Nevada. A pesticide called DDT caused their egg shells to be too thin, so that many of the chicks died. The Nevada Department of Wildlife and federal agencies reintroduced nesting pairs in the 1980's and 1990's. The effort was successful, and the peregrine was **de-listed** (taken off the endangered species list) in 2003. However, it is still protected by the International Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

In Nevada, there are about 20 nesting pairs that breed here each year. Most of them only stay through the winter, but a few individuals may be year-round residents. The word **peregrine** means wanderer, and they are named for their migratory tendencies.

Raptor Watching

Now that winter is here and the temperatures have dropped, you can think about getting outside to view some migratory birds. These traveling birds may include raptors, or birds of prey. Raptors are more plentiful in southern Nevada in the fall and winter. Birds from the north fly in to join other species that are year-long residents. They may include golden eagles, ospreys, red-tailed hawks and kestrels. Bald eagles and peregrine falcons can be seen moving into southern Nevada at this time as well. The most common of the migratory raptors that we see here are the Cooper's hawk and sharp-shinned hawk.

Hawks travel in the daytime, and can glide high above thermal air currents, so that they don't have to flap their wings as much and use up valuable energy. The National Wildlife Federation sponsors an annual hawkwatch, where birdwatchers tally the number and species of different hawks they see at popular migratory stopover sites. High mountain peaks serve as migration corridors and may be good areas to look for birds passing through.

Birds can also be sighted perching on power poles along highways.



Golden Eagle

Besides the bald eagle, there is another eagle that is commonly seen in the western United States. The golden eagle is a stately bird standing about two feet long (up to three feet in total length) with a wingspan that stretches about six feet across – that’s longer than the width of the windshield on a car! One of the largest raptors in North America, it prefers open areas with cliffs or other tall nesting sites. It is found in a variety of habitats from the northern arctic to southern desert.

Golden eagles hunt their prey using a variety of methods, including diving from a perch and on the wing, flying either low or high above. Prey species include rabbits, hares, and ground squirrels.



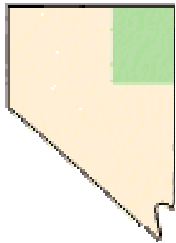
Photo by Margie Klein, NDOW

The black-tailed jackrabbit is a favorite. These birds are very territorial. They are also migratory and many travel each year to southern Nevada to spend the winter and breed.

Golden eagles are protected by the International Migratory Bird Treaty Act and by Nevada state law. It is illegal to harm, capture, kill or possess these birds without permits issued by the federal and state government. In addition, it is illegal to harass eagles under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. If a golden eagle is found killed, it must be turned over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which delivers it to Native American peoples who use the feathers in sacred ceremonies.

Hawkwatch International

One of the favorite places to view raptors is at a Hawkwatch Migration Station in northern Nevada. Hawkwatch International is an organization that aims to conserve the environment through education, long-term monitoring, and scientific research on raptors. One of their research projects is the Goshute Mountains Raptor Migration Project. The Goshute mountains are north of Ely. Every year, from August to November, the Hawkwatch folks and many volunteers count and band raptors that are migrating through this area, heading south. The Goshutes host one of the highest concentrations of migrating raptors in the western U.S. and Canada, with counts numbering from 10,000 to 25,000 birds of up to 18 different species. The Goshute bird count monitors long-term trends in populations of raptors that use the Intermountain Flyway for migration. It is important to see how populations of raptors are faring, because they are at the top of some food chains and show sensitivity to environmental changes. The counts also teach us about the breeding and wintering distributions and migratory habits of different species.



Hawkwatch information is available at <http://enature.com/outdoors/hawkwatch>, where you can look up “watch” sites and get information about visiting them.



Visit the
Goshute Mountains
site in Nevada
from August 15 to
November 5.

Project Wild and Flying Wild



The last Project Wild workshop was held October 2nd and 16th, 2010, at the Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW) southern region office. A motivated group of both classroom and nonformal educators filled the hours with outdoor activities, explorations of the food web, artistic endeavors, and problem-solving.

The Project Wild folks also have a curriculum called Flying Wild, that deals strictly with birds. Flying Wild activities were hosted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service at Beatty Days on October 30th, 2010, with NDOW participating. You can get Flying Wild activities from Robin Powell at the Nevada Audubon office, (775) 247-2798.



NEVADA
DEPARTMENT OF
WILDLIFE

Margie Klein
Conservation Educator III
Wildlife Education
Nevada Dept. of Wildlife
4747 Vegas Dr.
Las Vegas, NV 89108
702-486-5127 x 3502
mbklein@ndow.org
www.ndow.org

Myth or Fact?

Do you want to go snipe hunting? In some parts of the country, you need to be careful how you answer that. In most places, it's considered a joke, because there are no such things as snipe. So pranksters like to send people off in search of something that doesn't exist. It's just like a wild goose chase. In Nevada, however, you can say, "Yes!" because they really do exist here. The common snipe or Wilson's snipe is a shorebird about 10 1/2 inches long, dark brown with cream-colored stripes on the back and barring on the underside. They live around freshwater ponds and lakes, where they like to hide in surrounding vegetation. In northern Nevada, they are year-long residents, and in southern Nevada, can be found in the winter. Snipe are described as "uncommon, inconspicuous, and solitary." No wonder they're known for being difficult to hunt. That's where the word "sniper" came from. Nevada's hunting season for snipe is October through January.

In places where snipe hunting is treated as a practical joke, people tell the tale of how to catch a snipe: follow a snipe trail (if you can figure out what that is) in the woods or an open field and bang rocks together to call them. Then sit and wait for them, sometimes for a very long time. Be sure you have a bag with you to throw over the bird's head when you see it and a baseball bat to knock it out. It's for certain that you won't come back with anything, but the folks that sent you out on the hunt will get a good laugh.



Activity: Bird Silhouettes

Did you know that you can identify many birds just by their silhouette? A silhouette is the outline of something, without the color, just like a shadow. The silhouette will tell you the size and shape of a bird, and is the first step in determining what a bird is. Beginning birders will have a much easier time just recognizing silhouettes for a basic identification, rather than trying to identify small colorings on sometimes hard-to-see areas of the bird's body. Most different groups of birds (families) can be identified by their silhouettes.

For instance, you can see from the silhouettes below on the left that each belongs to a different type of bird. Birds in that category will look generally the same by silhouette. Notice outstanding features in the silhouette, such as head shape, tail shape, body mass, leg and beak lengths, and overall posture. Teachers can use these silhouettes with the students to practice recognition. Ask the students the size of the bird – is it large like a turkey, or small like a sparrow? After that, ask them to tell if it is stout or thin, tall or short? Then ask them what the head looks like – is there a crown of feathers on top or no feathers at all? Next, have them look at the bill – different bill shapes tell what kind of food the bird feeds on. Is it thick and strong to crack nuts and seeds? Long and curved for hunting prey in the water? Narrow and pointed for drilling into bark? Or is it a raptor, strong with a large point on it to tear flesh? Have students look at the wings – are they pointed, wide, curved, or barely there? The wings determine how a bird flies. Raptors are one group of birds that can be well-identified by their silhouettes in flight (below, right). Students can look at the tail and determine its locomotion and habitat, as well.



Turkeys and peacocks have large showy tails, which might get in the way of fast flight. Hummingbirds have relatively short tails. Also have them notice if it is forked or smooth. Finally, have them look at the legs and feet. What do long legs signify? What about webbed feet versus thin toes? All of these factors are clues to the different kinds of birds. Only after the students have mastered the shapes will they need to look at the colors of the bird.

Here is a website that will allow you to download and print bird silhouettes to practice with: <http://www.fun-with-pictures.com/birds-silhouettes.html>.

