



Young Illinois naturalist, Bill Voelker, with one of his eagles.

The Eagle Man

by Grover Brinkman
Columbia, Illinois

Turning into the driveway the Voelker farm near Millstadt seems much like other farms in southern Illinois. A ranch-house graces the tree-studded yard; in an adjacent pasture graze several paint ponies. But once the back yard is gained, one sees the eagles.

That's right, eagles! Not one or two but many, some with a 7-1/2 feet wing spread. Their shrill cries have a primitive note that is unforgettable.

Young Bill Voelker, 31-year-old son of Mrs. and Mrs. Bob Voelker, is one of a handful of men in the nation working constantly to restore the eagle population in our land. Bill's mother, Evelyn, is a full-blooded Comanche Indian, busy in updating the Indian culture of this area. His father, a German Catholic, widely traveled in the west in his work with eagles, met his future bride at an Indian fair at Andarko, Oklahoma. Already he was interested in Indian crafts and culture, and his marriage to Evelyn,

who grew up in an Oklahoma Indian School, further enhanced the Indian image in the Voelker home.

Bill credits his father and mother for having initiated his passion for work with eagles. As most people know, the bald eagle has long been on our endangered species list.

As a youth, Bill futhered his study of eagles, first at Oklahoma University then at Cornell, the mecca of ornithologists. "And I'm going back," he said.

What appeals to Bill most is his field work with eagles all over the nation. When interviewed, he had just returned from the Great Smokeys. Regularly he commutes from Millstadt to Oklahoma, always in the interest of wildlife.

At 31, Bill Voelker is known nationwide for his work with eagles. He is an executive director of the South Prairie Raptor Research Center at Norman, Oklahoma, a study-site for birds of prey.

Keeping and breeding eagles is not an

open business. Every eagle in the nation is property of the government, and people who work with the birds must be licensed by the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. He does not get one cent from the government for his full-time work with eagles but depends on lectures in schools, seminars and private gifts to continue his work, one of a handful of dedicated naturalists working for a great cause.

"Slowly but surely the eagles are coming back," Bill said. "Bald eagles now number around 10,000 outside of Alaska, but we have a long way to go before they can be taken off the endangered list. Back in 1976, there were less than 4,000 in the entire country."

Bill Voelker is a sturdily-built young man, with thick black hair and dark complexion, reflecting his Comanche heritage. His love of the eagles is reflected in his eyes, in his every mannerism. He breeds eagles by artificial insemination, and is so successful in this work that each spring sees a new crop of chicks. At times Bill's eagles are as many as 80.

In a fenced area on the farm were six young eagles, all of them having been injured at one time, some shot, others with broken wings. "They'll never fly again," Bill explained. "The human damage to them is too great. But we can use them for breeding purposes, so they are not destroyed."

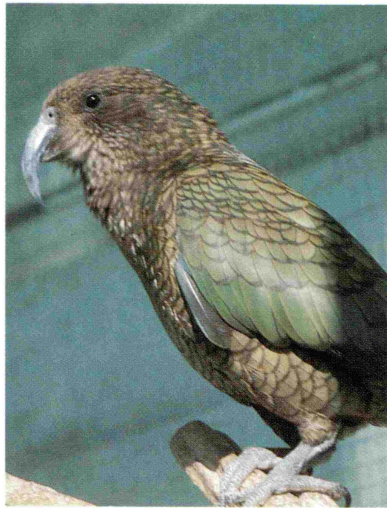
There is a note of despair in Bill's voice as he talks about the lack of financial assistance provided by the government in this work. To feed his 75 or more eagles costs about \$12,000 yearly. Diet is fish and other meats. The daily work load is immense. Corporations and other business firms donate money to keep this noble work going, but not one dime from the government, only an extreme amount of paper work. "Every time I take an eagle across a state line there are papers to fill out," he said.

Both his father and mother are active in Indian affairs in the St. Louis area. His father has one of the largest collections of eagle feathers in the world. Some of the Indian artifacts in this Millstadt home are museum pieces.

"The eagle is a sacred bird to all Indians," Bill continued. "It is much used in their prayers, something like a Catholic using a rosary." The slaughter of these magnificent birds by indiscriminate hunters has been awesome, according to Bill. But this has been curbed to a degree by strict federal regulation.

If we had a few more dedicated men like young Bill Voelker, the great bald eagle family would soon be off the endangered species list! ●

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