

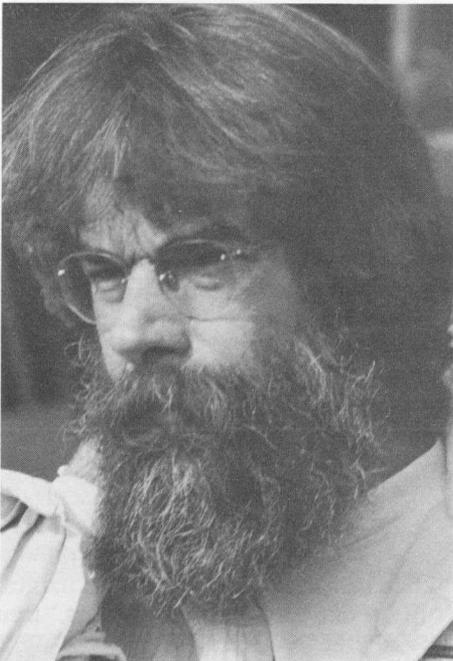
Dan Deuel, Birdman-by-the-Sea

by Jan Parrott-Holden
Vancouver, Washington

Bandon, Oregon is a sleepy little coastal town, the kind of place where people strike up conversations easily, where eye contact still exists and where one man's business soon becomes common knowledge. In many ways, I suppose, Bandon is not unlike other seaside communities. The air smells of salt. The Monterey pines are bent and gnarled by the wind. And there are birds — lots and lots of birds.

If in fact Bandon, Oregon can lay claim to something truly unique, it is Dan Deuel, founder of "Free Flight," a bird rehabilitation center.

Deuel, like so many enthusiasts, discovered his interest early in life. As a child in the fifties he kept many avian species including magpies, pigeons, barn owls, and teals. But like the rest of us, as the years progressed, other endeavors pulled him away from his ardent devotion to the bird world. There was his military service in Vietnam, where he did counterintelligence work and returned wounded, decorated and committed to pacifism. But there was another, more pivotal experience to follow. It happened stateside one evening when Deuel was returning home from work. Spotting a motorcyclist stalled at the roadside, he stopped to offer assistance. Seconds later he was hit by a drunken driver. His pelvis was shattered and his skull fractured. In fact, so severe were Deuel's injuries that hope for his survival was nil. But Deuel did survive, causing enough excitement to insure documentation in medical journals. When he left the hospital, it was clear that he would never experience total rehabilitation. He would have to learn to walk again, and it would never be as easy as before. But Deuel's spirit was not broken, and even then, the old flames were being fanned. He was about to return to his lifetime commitment to nature. It would start



Dan Deuel, Birdman-by-the-Sea



Free Flight looks out over a panoramic stretch of beach and ocean.

Photos by Steve Holden, Vancouver, Washington

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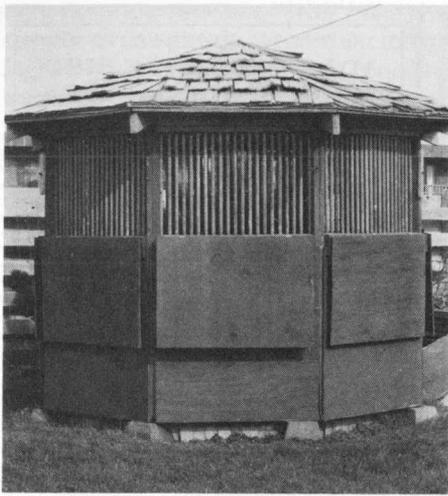
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Close up shot of one of Deuel's mews.

with a desire to treat every injured bird he could find and would evolve into a staunch resolution to educate people to the Schweitzerian philosophy of "reverence for life."

Like most rehabbers, Deuel taught himself the necessary skills. What could not be learned through "hands on" methods was gleaned through college courses in ornithology and biology. Beyond that, there was the establishment of close ties with a local veterinarian, Joe Pettit. And there were books, reference tools to be read, studied and reread.

In 1978 Deuel's dream for a South Coast Bird Rehabilitation Center became reality. He took in and treated fifty-four birds, including raptors as well as pelagic specimens. It was just the beginning. By 1980 he was treating numbers exceeding three hundred. (Deuel can recollect one particular day when he received more than forty birds, all in various stages of need). Many he

readily admits were beyond help. But there were others, wounded, exhausted, stressed, orphaned and oiled patients who were treated, restored and released to their former existence. All this was done with loving concern, yet with a practical reluctance to "imprint" the birds, making successful return to the wild chancy.

Some of the birdman's patients suffer irreversible injuries — most caused by man's ruthlessness. One of these is a screech owl, blinded due to a collision with an automobile. Another, a magnificent hawk, victim of a leg-hold trap. And still another, downed by a shotgun blast. These charges Deuel uses as visual aides for his educational programs delivered both locally and along the Pacific coastline. His audiences are young and old, men and women. His podium is set up in the schoolroom, a zoo, bird club gatherings and before service organizations. His message is always the same — respect, protect, conserve. It's an awesome task. The uncaring are always to remain an albatross around Deuel's neck.

When visiting the birdman, one cannot ignore the breathtaking beauty surrounding the "Free Flight" headquarters. Measureless stretches of ocean, massive rocks jutting out of the surf. Things of beauty and purpose. The rocks provide breeding sites for birds and marine mammals and, with luck, a chance to escape the cutting wind or the aggressive nature of man. Behind his home/office Deuel has erected three impressive looking mews for housing both permanent and transitory residents of the rehabilitation center. The octagon-shaped buildings are equipped with shutters that can be battened down during severe weather. Everything is

kept scrupulously clean. When the weather turns favorable, Deuel tethers his hawks in a grassy area near the house so they can benefit from the sunshine and flex their wings. There's an apparent trust as the birdman talks softly to his patients. A mutual respect seems to exist, a realization upon Deuel's part, anyway, that they are all soulmates. The birds do not "belong" as a cage-bird belongs. There are no gilded cages. There is only security provided by a bearded man whom the birds have learned bears them no ill.

Since its inception, Free Flight has maintained its non-profit status. Costs are met through volunteer donations of money and materials. Local veterinarians provide what they can in the way of surgical supplies and assistance. They are on hand for consultation, which Deuel admits he requests frequently, particularly in trauma cases.

Food for the raptor patients consists primarily of road kill and laboratory mice donated through a college biology department. Deuel is thrifty. But perhaps more thrifty with what he obtains for his own "creature comforts" than with the needs of his birds. "Their welfare is my first consideration. I don't like playing God," he adds, admitting that it is often left for him to decide the fate of a particular specimen. In the end he must ask himself tough questions. But Deuel is a firm believer in "quality of life." There is nothing to substantiate prolongation of suffering in a creature. The birdman knows this for a fact.

The greatest gratification for Dan Deuel lies in that long-awaited moment when he can set free one of his charges, fully recuperated and ready for "free flight." Yet Deuel is the first to admit it seldom happens as depicted on television. Says Deuel, "A hawk which has been dependent upon man for all of its needs in the period of recuperation is a confused hawk. A hawk which is going to have to make its own way in the world again is a terrified hawk. Such a bird does not leap into the air and soar off into the sunset. But maybe it flies a few feet and perches on a fence post. Maybe the next day it catches a mouse. Maybe the next spring it mates and establishes a territory. And, maybe, and this is the shakiest maybe of all, no one uses it for target practice again."

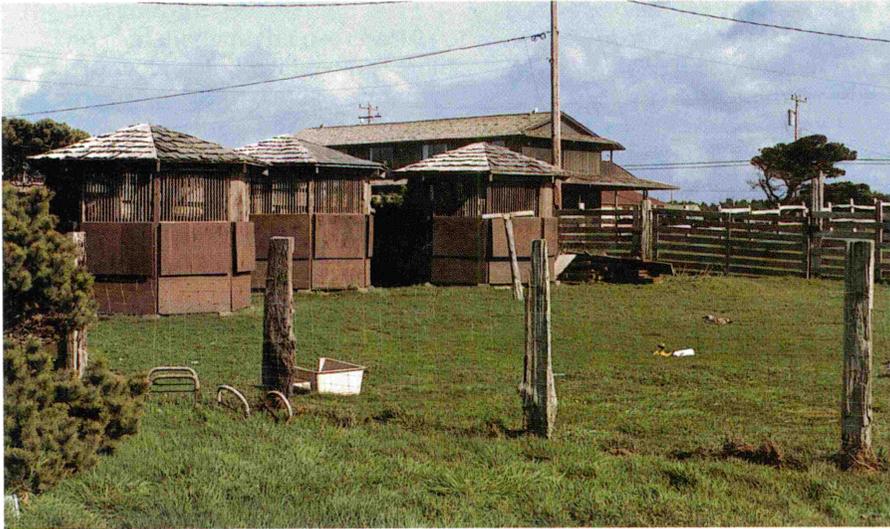
Here, I believe, is where all true bird-lovers stand united. We sincerely hope that Dan's right.

For more information about Free Flight contact Dan Deuel at 1185 Portland Avenue, Bandon, Oregon 97411. ●

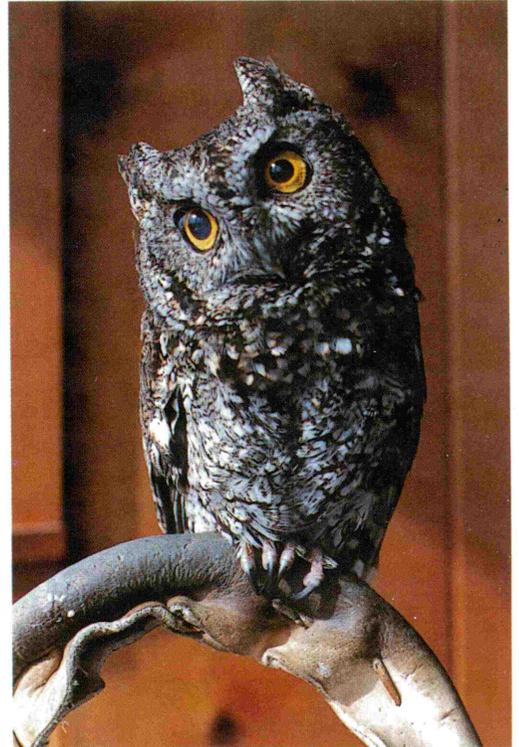


Photos by Steve Holden

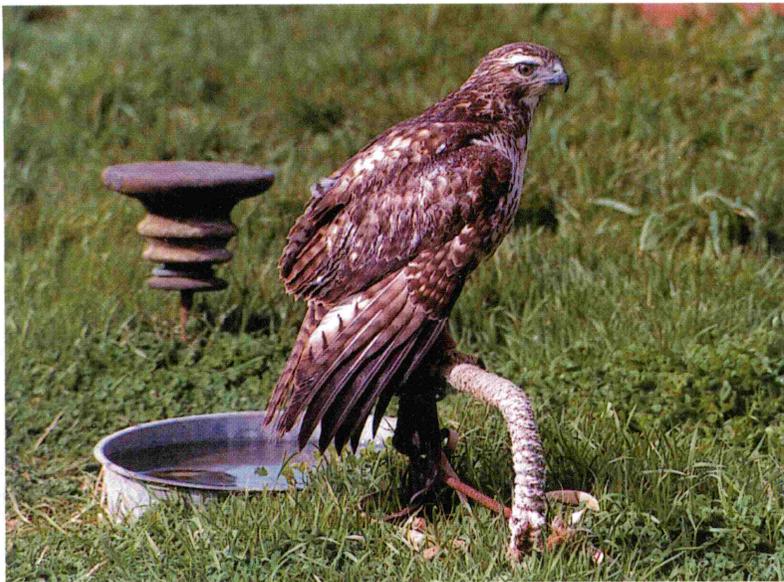
These rocks provide shelter and breeding areas for pelagic (sea-going) birds and seals.



Three handcrafted mews (houses for birds of prey) hold patients on the "Free Flight" grounds.



One of Dan's permanent residents, a screech owl blinded when it collided with a motor vehicle.



Tethered in Deuel's yard, this red-tailed hawk eyes the camera with suspicion.



Photos by Steve Holden, Vancouver, Washington



"Kareem," an injured Indian runner duck, comes closest to being a pet of any of Deuel's charges. Here he shows the photographer his best side.