



Conservation Education, Avian Research, Raptor Rescue & Collaboration with Others



A Pantanal Perspective

**by Gail Garber
Executive Director**

On Halloween 2025, we returned from our trip to Brazil where we visited the UNESCO World Heritage Site, the [Pantanal](#) wetlands. Our 10-member expedition team hailed from three different states: Washington, Texas, and New Mexico. Although HAI has led international tours since 2002, we have increased the annual number of trips and destinations. Our Pantanal trip was the result of five years of careful planning between Holbrook Travel and HAI.

At 17 million hectares, the Pantanal is the world's largest tropical wetland located primarily in Brazil (80%) with parts in Bolivia and Paraguay. This vast area is famous for its incredible biodiversity, including large populations of jaguars, caimans, and multiple species of parrots, including the brilliant royal blue [Hyacinth Macaw](#). We were fortunate to visit both the north and south areas.

During the rainy season, between November and March, much of the Pantanal is flooded but the bays remain shallow and receive intense light. These conditions create an environment favorable for the growth of plants, microalgae, and macrophytes which form the basis of the food chain for the small invertebrates and fish that inhabit the waters. Because the Pantanal is partly isolated from the large rivers, its bays are excellent nurseries for small fish, keeping them safe from predators. The fish species found there are not large, but their numbers are astounding. At times, backwater areas appeared to be 'boiling' with the fish which in turn sustain all higher-level predators including birds, caiman, capybara, giant river otters, and jaguars.

The two regions were vastly different. The southern reach was dominated by large cattle ranches where patches of forest and grasslands held a wealth of macaws along with a multitude of other species, like [Common](#) and [Great Potoos](#), and a [Bat Falcon](#)! The Pousada Aguape proved to be incredibly rich in wildlife and provided our first encounters with the giant anteater and its smaller cousin the tamandua (aka the lesser anteater). These two species comfortably coexist because the giant is limited to feeding on terrestrial ants and termites whereas the tamandua is arboreal! An evening outing revealed treasures of the night including a disappointed treed ocelot that was watching foxes below devour the crabs that he had previously caught. The open-air dining room hosted not only humans but also six-banded armadillos, [Red-legged Seriemas](#) and even an unbothered [Bare-faced Curassow](#) that wandered unhurried through the facility oblivious to the human diners. The specialized macaw feeders, including one stocked with the favorite palm nuts of the Hyacinth Macaw, were continually packed with [Blue and Yellow Macaws](#) and [Nanday Parakeets](#) among other parrots.





Following a very long travel day with two in-country flights, we found ourselves at the entrance to the Transpantaniara Highway, a 140 km long raised dirt road replete with 140 wooden bridges that crossed the wetlands below. Brazil was in the process of replacing some of the ricketiest of bridges and in those cases our vehicles had to drop down into the now drier wetlands to circumvent the main highway.

Upon arrival at the WildSouth Flotel, our home on the Cuiaba River, the owners excitedly told us that a jaguar had been spotted on the shore right next to the floating hotel. Our guide, Enrique Castillo, had told us that he hoped we would see at least one jaguar, so it was thrilling to hear that one was already nearby. What a way to begin our adventure to the North Pantanal, also conveniently known as Jaguarland!

Living on the river, our days flowed along with small safari boat rides morning and afternoon with a siesta after lunch and evening lectures after dinner. Interestingly, much like an African safari, we tourists were confined to small motorboats while the wildlife went about their daily business, seemingly oblivious to us trespassers. The boat guides all carried radios to alert the other boats when a jaguar was spotted so that we all could converge on the location. It sounds aesthetically unpleasant, but the boat guides and drivers moved as if in a choreographed dance, making room for all. Amazingly, the animals didn't care! It was eerily silent as we watched through our camera lenses. Mostly there was no need for binoculars because the animals were so close. Brazil has outlawed hunting of all wildlife and although illegal hunting still does occur, the birds and mammals were confident and unworried about the human visitors. Moreover, boats are banned from the rivers after dark when jaguars are most active.

Two of our nine jaguar sightings were especially poignant, at least me. The first was of an adult male jaguar (collared) swimming along carrying the remains of the caiman he had feasted upon, apparently intent on finding a suitable hiding spot to stash the partially eaten carcass. The second was a female and her cub. They were walking along the riverbank far above the water level. Suddenly, mom decided to climb down the steep bank. At first her cub was on board but then made a hasty retreat back up the bank when mom began to slide. Like moms everywhere, she failed to notice that her child was not with her! Eventually, she caught on and quickly returned to her cub,

this time making sure he descended. We watched with nervous anticipation while mom followed by her young cub swam all the way across the river!

This trip was among the most magical of all my travel adventures, so much so that we are already organizing a Return to Pantanal for late summer of 2027. Stay tuned for details.

Thank you to all of our expedition team: Hoiman Low, Charles Ogburn, Dave Parsons, Mary Raje, Sami Sanborn, Gerry Swanson, Ute Welklow, Gayle Vance, Gene Vance. You made it magical!

[Click here to view the Pantanal Gallery of Photos.](#)

Cover photo of Giant Anteater by Hoiman Low, Collage: Ocelot and Tamandua by Gene Vance; Red and Green Macaws by Gail Garber, Great Potoo by Hoiman Low. Jaguar swimming with Caiman remains by Gail Garber.



**Thank you to each of our funders for your ongoing support!
We could not do all that we do without you! In the fields of
Conservation Education, Avian Research, Raptor Rescue and
Collaboration with Others!**



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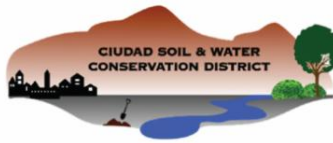
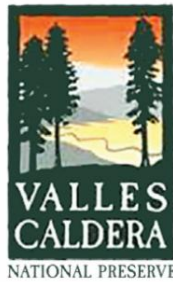
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THE FROST FOUNDATION



Meet Mackenzie Hall

Naturalist/Educator Avian Surveyor

Please join us in welcoming our newest staff member!

I'm Mackenzie and I just joined the Hawks Aloft team as an educator and naturalist. I have a strong passion for birds and have always been drawn to raptors, particularly the [Peregrine Falcon](#) - my favorite.

Previously, I worked at South Plains Wildlife Rehabilitation Center in Lubbock, Texas. There I fell in love with the ability to help an injured animal and to see it released. Being a part of the recovery and rehabilitation of an animal is very rewarding.

Now, having completed my master's in environmental management and sustainability from the University of Malta and Integrated Science and Technology from James Madison University I have found my way to Hawks Aloft.

I enjoy any activity that is outside, from birding to camping and hiking. I also love



traveling, seeing new places and experiencing new cultures from around the world. I'm excited to learn more about raptors and to work with the Hawks Aloft team.

Photos: Mackenzie dressed as a raptor; with Jemez, our educational Mexican Spotted Owl; at Roadrunner Emergency Veterinary Hospital where our Prairie Falcon patient is receiving laser therapy.



**Thank you Avangrid Foundation,
for granting Hawks Aloft our sixth consecutive year of
funding for Raptor Rescue!**



It Takes a Village!

By Heather Rissi
Education Coordinator/Writer

Near the end of September we received a call about a downed [Prairie Falcon](#) in Truchas, NM. Hawks Aloft volunteer, Steve Priola and his son drove from Santa Fe to catch the bird before transporting it to Albuquerque where Dr. Christine Fiorello was waiting. The female falcon was emaciated, her lower eyelid was split down the middle, she had a very large laceration near the elbow of the left wing, and her radius was fractured. She was anesthetized at [Northwest Animal Clinic & Hospital](#) and Dr. Fiorello sutured her eyelid and cleaned the wound. It was touch and go if she would survive.

However, a fighter to the core, the falcon's condition quickly improved over the next month, assisted by her ferocious appetite. During bandage changes and physical therapy sessions, Dr. Fiorello found that her patagium, the membrane of skin extending from the shoulder to the wrist, was contracted due to the healing wound repair and her immobilized

broken wing. Warm compressions and massage helped extend the patagium but not to a normal degree.

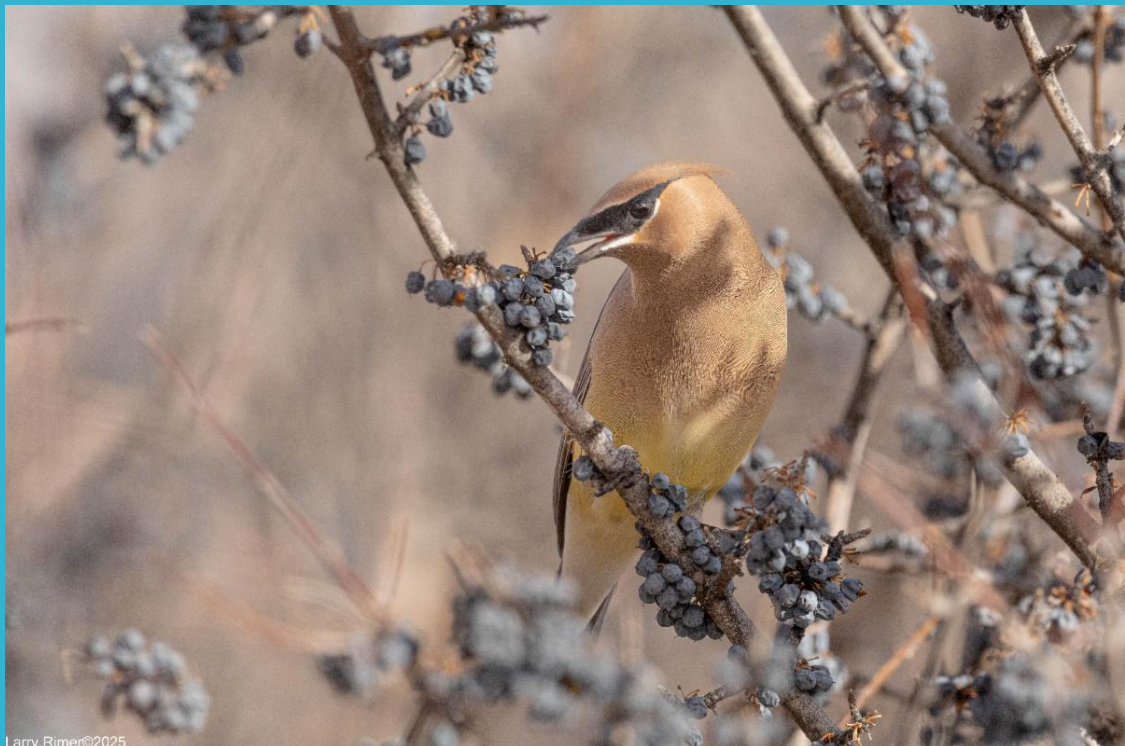
So, our intrepid Dr. Fiorello reached out to [Roadrunner Veterinary Emergency & Specialty Hospital](#) to see if they would administer weekly laser therapy and they enthusiastically agreed! She also received weekly physical therapy sessions under general anesthesia (to improve mobility). Dr. Fiorello then wanted to try injecting a small amount of Botox near the patagium to relax the muscle fiber and loosen the tendon. Botox is very expensive, but we only needed a small amount. Dr. Fiorello reached out to [Duke City Smiles](#), who directed her to [Desert Mountain Oral Surgery and Facial Esthetics](#). Eryka from Desert Mountain graciously donated two doses that were used weeks apart.

Since her arrival, the Prairie Falcon's patagium contracture has greatly improved and her mobility has increased. She still has many hurdles to pass, but we are guardedly optimistic about her potential release.

Collaboration during this rehabilitation process has been vital to her progress, and we are extremely grateful to Roadrunner Veterinary, Northwest Animal Clinic, and Desert Mountain Oral Surgery for their generous assistance.

Thank you to our funders who make Raptor Rescue possible: [Avangrid](#), [PNM](#), [Nusenda Credit Union](#), [The Edw. F. Zimmer Community Fund](#), [Albuquerque Community Foundation](#), [The Frost Foundation](#), [FHL Foundation](#) and our members and donors.





Larry Rimer©2025

Year 23 of the MRGSS

**By Trevor Fetz, Ph.D
Research Director**

The beginning of December also marks the beginning of the 23rd winter field season of the Middle Rio Grande Songbird Study (MRGSS). At the time of this writing, I'm still trying to determine which transects we survey this winter, but the total number should be around 50. Since funding for winter MRGSS surveys from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers ended in 2019, HAI has internally funded the entire winter portion of this project. We feel it is important to continue adding winter data to this long-term data set, but the number of transects we can survey is influenced by our financial situation. The number of transects surveyed also is substantially bolstered by our dedicated team of volunteer surveyors, and they are vital in our efforts during both winter and summer to maintain robust data collection.



Last summer was unique in the history of the MRGSS, as a very poor snowpack resulted in extremely low summer flows in the Rio Grande throughout the MRGSS survey area, including extensive areas where the Rio Grande was completely dry for more than half of the summer survey season. Similarly, extensive sections of the riverside drains in the survey area also were dry for a majority of the summer. The lack of surface water certainly impacted breeding birds last summer. Water is once again flowing throughout the middle Rio Grande and in the riverside drains, but it will be interesting to see if we can detect any lingering impact from last summer's dry conditions.

The size of the [Russian olive](#) and [New Mexico olive](#) berry crops in the bosque always have a substantial impact on winter avian density. Large berry crops attract high densities of wintering birds to the bosque, but during winters when the crops are poor or depleted, avian density is reduced. A vast majority of the wintering bosque birds eat berries as some portion of their diet, but the density, and even presence of some species is dependent on the berry crop. [American Robin](#), [Cedar Waxwing](#), [Eastern Bluebird](#), [Hermit Thrush](#), [Northern Flicker](#), [Western Bluebird](#), and [Yellow-rumped Warbler](#) are some of the species whose winter bosque densities are largely impacted by the berry crop size. [Mountain Bluebird](#) generally doesn't venture into the bosque, but can be present in large numbers during winters when berries are particularly abundant.

Last summer, it appeared that the berry crop was going to be strong. But during the latter part of the summer field season, we documented much higher than normal foraging on the berries. The increased berry foraging may have been related to reduced invertebrate prey due to the dry conditions in and outside of the bosque. Species that were particularly focused on berries in August included Neotropical migrants fattening up for their trip south (e.g., [Black-headed Grosbeak](#), [Blue Grosbeak](#), [Bullock's Oriole](#), [Western Tanager](#)) and resident species that generally don't congregate in large numbers in the bosque during summer (American Robin, Northern Flicker). I did not spend much time in the bosque during autumn, so it will be interesting to see what impact the summer birds had on winter berry availability.

Cedar Waxwing and Western Bluebird photos by Larry Rimer.



A New Garden at Old Town Farm

By Heather Rissi
Education Coordinator/Writer

If you read last month's article about our Living with the Landscape (LWL) pollinator garden projects, you know that typically 5th grade students participate in creating a garden on their campus so that they can care for it throughout the school year. However, one of our participating schools, Reginald Chavez Elementary, was unable to accommodate a garden due to time constraints and limitations.



That's when we decided to reach out to Lanny Tanning and Linda Thorne at [Old Town Farm](#) to see if they could help. The two already work closely with Reginald Chavez by contributing to the music and dance program at the school. They gladly agreed to set aside a part of their property to create a children's pollinator garden so that students from the school (which is a mere 10-minute walk away) could come visit anytime! Our partners at [Pollinators in the Neighborhood](#) (PIN) readily agreed and set to work corresponding with Linda to develop a plan.

Although the students could not help, PIN staff Elizabeth Reed and Mima Falk rounded up some volunteers and with the help of them and Hawks Aloft educators, Liz Roberts and myself, we set to work on Saturday morning in late October. Linda and Mima agreed on a design. PIN staff and volunteers carted dozens of pollinator plants in wagons and Lanny used a tractor to bring over load after load of mulch and soil. Over the next couple hours, we readied the plot (approximately 24x40 feet) by pulling weeds and installing drip hose irrigation. Finally, we planted a variety of organic native pollinator plants with taller plants in the back and reserved the middle for a bench and gathering spot. Unfortunately, we did

not complete the entire garden in one day, but Elizabeth and Mima returned a couple days later for the final touches.

We are beyond excited about this garden and thrilled we were able to partner with both PIN and Lanny and Linda from Old Town Farm. If you recall, our end of the year field trip centers on taking all 5th grade students for a day trip to Old Town Farm where they learn about organic farming and life near the bosque. The addition of the pollinator gardens brings our school gardening projects full circle and allows the students from all four of our participating LWL schools to enjoy the beauty of a new pollinator garden in the middle of a busy city for years to come.

Above, Elizabeth Reed and Mima Falk (PIN) unload plants. Photos by Heather Rissi.



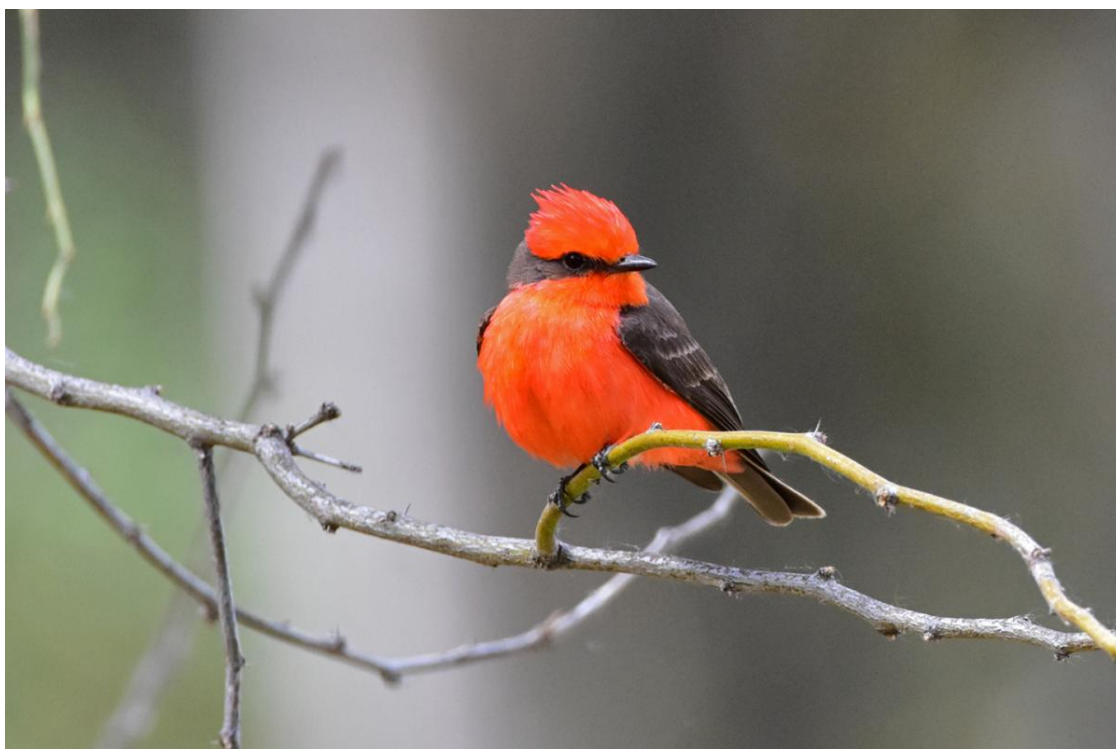
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**Hawks Aloft Quilt Raffle 2025
We have a Winner!**

Congratulations Kat Brown!

Photo by Gail Garber



Naturally Red:

Vermillion Flycatcher

by Nate and Jeanne Gowan

During a May 2000 camping trip throughout Southeast Arizona, we visited the [Patton Center for Hummingbirds](#) in Patagonia. The center was filled with chairs and feeding stations, and we were encouraged to just sit and enjoy the avian show. We saw dozens including several species of hummingbirds we had never seen before. We also saw other species including a [Northern Cardinal](#), which we had not seen since leaving the northeast states. In that same tree, we spotted another red bird which was a brighter and more vibrant red than the Cardinal. At last, we saw the [Vermillion Flycatcher](#), a new species for us.



Since that first sighting in Arizona, we have observed Vermillion Flycatchers in southern New Mexico while camping at [Elephant Butte](#) and [Caballo Lakes](#) State Parks. In this part of our state, they are non-migratory and are reported year-around at the [Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge](#) as well as other birding hotspots like [Percha Dam State Park](#) and [Leasburg Dam State Park](#). We have always been excited to encounter this bright red beauty, and to watch as it hunts and flies to catch insects.

The Vermillion Flycatcher was first described in the late 1830s after being collected during Charles Darwin's second voyage on the HMS Beagle (1831-1836). The male of this species is a colorful exception among the generally less vibrant flycatcher family. Its scientific genus name is *Pyrocephalus*, Greek for "fire-headed".

The Vermillion Flycatcher's color depends on its diet. Males kept in captivity tend to lose their vibrant red plumage without the carotenoids (yellow pigments also found in pumpkins, carrots, corn, oranges) that metabolize into their red coloration. These carotenoids are found in their natural diet of bees, grasshoppers, flies, and beetles that got their carotenoids from the plant material they eat (behold the food chain!). These insects are caught using a "sit-and-wait" technique while the bird is perched on a branch or fence line.

During courtship, the male exhibits an elaborate fluttering flight display, rising high into the air while singing. He might present the female with a "flashy" insect like a butterfly to entice her. Females are the nest builders. They use small twigs and grasses, often bound by spider webbing. Their nests can be additionally camouflaged with lichen. We saw – though not easily! – several camouflaged nests like this along the river at Caballo Lake State Park.

In parts of Mexico (e.g., Oaxaca), the locals call this bird "bien viaje" or the "bon voyage bird" and it is considered a very good omen if the Vermillion Flycatcher is facing you. Cardinals are often associated with Christmas, but if you spot a Vermillion flycatcher facing you this season, perhaps it is a harbinger for good luck in the new year. We wish you a happy and healthy 2026.

Photos by Nate Gowan

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- Explore the Amazonian lowlands by boat and on foot to look for colorful macaws, tanagers, and the enigmatic [Hoatzin](#).
- Discover the mist-fed ecosystem of Lomas de Lachay, home to an oasis of dwarf forest in the Peruvian desert.
- Visit Pantanos de Villa, a Ramsar Wetland of International Importance that provides critical habitat for waterfowl and migratory shorebirds.
- Witness the seabirds of Ballestas Islands, including species such as the [Humboldt Penguin](#), [Peruvian Booby](#), [Inca Tern](#), and the near-threatened [Peruvian Diving-Petrel](#).

Click [here](#) for complete details and for registration.

Photos: Top Photo clockwise from top right: [Paradise Tanager](#)/Ian Segebarth, Hoatzin/Holbrook stock, Machu Picchu/Debbie Sturdivant Jordan/Weaving demonstration/Laura Hare. [Andean Cock of the Rock](#) by Ian Segebarth.

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[Western Spindalis](#), image courtesy of Holbrook Travel.



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Click [Here](#) for complete details

Hawks Aloft Merchandise



T-shirts (both long and short-sleeved) are \$30 and can be ordered on our website or can be picked up at the office. Ladies sizes are available in short sleeves; all long-sleeved shirts are unisex, and we also have youth sizes in short sleeves available for \$25.

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Many of you have long been Hawks Aloft supporters, and a good number of you have also been longtime Smith's shoppers. For those not in the know, the grocery chain has a program that provides a small kick-back quarterly to nonprofits when their supporters link their shopper's cards to the organization.



The company recently changed their policies regarding the program; so even if you've signed up in the past, you may need to do it again! The good news is that it is easy to do so.

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4. From there, scroll down to **"Inspiring Donations Program"** and click **"Enroll"**
5. A searchable list will come up, you can either search for **"Hawks Aloft"** or enter our ID number for the program, **"GL430."**
6. Shop using your card and know that every time you do, you help out Hawks Aloft!

We appreciate your ongoing support in this and so many other capacities!

Adopt A Raptor

Meet Jemez!

The Mexican Spotted Owl

Jemez was found early one December morning, in a snowbank on the side of the road, by an employee of Los Alamos Laboratories on his way to work. She was in very critical condition when she arrived at Hawks Aloft, suffering from head trauma and a severe left-eye injury. Our rescuers and veterinarians were not sure if she would be able to survive these injuries, but amazingly, on Christmas Eve, she began to show signs of recovering. She is our Christmas Miracle bird!



The remainder of her left eye was removed by Dr. Kariana Atkinson of Petroglyph Animal Hospital and she was named Jemez after the Jemez Mountains where she was found. She has become a beloved member of our Hawks Aloft family.

[Mexican Spotted Owls](#) (*Strix occidentalis lucida*) are considered threatened according to the U.S. Endangered Species Act. Spotted owls throughout the U.S. face threats from loss of habitat and competition from Barred Owls (*Strix varia*). A unique trait of the spotted owl is that their eyes appear to be completely black.

Please consider adopting this amazing ambassador bird!

When you adopt a Hawks Aloft raptor you receive:

- A one-year Hawks Aloft membership
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A professional 8×10 photo of your bird, or

A stuffed Audubon Bird with realistic vocalizations (if available for that species)

[Click here to learn more about our Avian Ambassadors](#)

Photo by Larry Rimer



Photographer's Monthly Gallery

Featuring

**Hoiman Low
& Gene Vance**

Hoiman Low (left) and Gene Vance (right), both experienced photographers, participated in the Hawks Aloft Pantanal trip, capturing special sightings and observations.

Here, we present their images captured with their Sony A1 Cameras. Enjoy!

[Click here to view the full gallery of photos.](#)

1. [Toco Toucan](#) being harrassed in flight by a [Great Kiskadee](#) - Hoiman Low

2. [Red-billed Scythebill](#) - Hoiman Low
3. [Sunbittern](#), incubating eggs on her nest - Hoiman Low
4. [Mato Grosso Antbird](#) - Gene Vance
5. [Scarlet Macaw](#) - Gene Vance
6. Jaguar - Gene Vance









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**Raptor Rescue Calls
and Patient Intakes
October 2025**

Hotline Calls: 27
Patient intakes: 13

- Red-tailed Hawk,
Nonspecific (juvenile)
- Cooper's Hawk,
Radius/Ulna Fracture
- Western Screech Owl,
Head Trauma
- Ferruginous Hawk,
Barbed Wire Injury
(juvenile)
- Red-tailed Hawk,
Humeral Fracture
(juvenile)
- Cooper's Hawk, Head
Trauma
- American Crow,
Neurologic Disease
- Great Horned Owl,
Head Trauma
- Cooper's Hawk,
Gunshot
- Cooper's Hawk, DOA
- Northern Saw-whet
Owl, Head
Trauma/Eye Injury
- Cooper's Hawk,
Physical Injury
(juvenile)
- Red-tailed Hawk,
Wing Injury

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Conservation Education, Avian Research, Raptor Rescue & Collaboration with Others

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Gail Garber, *Executive Director*
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Linda Contos, *DVM, Consulting Veterinarian*
Trevor Fetz, *Research Director*
Christine Fiorello, *DVM, Veterinarian*
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Evelyn McGarry, *Office Manager, Raptor Rescue Dispatcher*
Calle Poindexter, *Events*
Andrew Orr, *GIS Mapping*
Alex Preston, *Avian Surveyor*
Larry Rimer, *Project Manager*
Heather Rissi, *Education Coordinator*
Liz Roberts, *Senior Educator/Naturalist*
PD St. Clair, *Naturalist/Admin*
Dallas Steele, *Bookkeeper*
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