

Hoo's Wood Raptor Center program takes flight at fair

By Pam Chickering Wilson Union staff writer | Posted: Thursday, July 7, 2016 9:26 am

JEFFERSON — Jefferson is a strange place to find a tropical owl who normally lives in the rainforest. It's stranger still to find the bird in the middle of crowds of people, but that's just where Oakley the Spectacled Owl will be for all of this week.

Oakley and other birds of prey from Hoo's Woods Raptor Center will be featured in two free educational shows per day throughout the run of the Jefferson County Fair. Today, Friday and Saturday, shows will take place at 3:30 and 5:30 p.m., while on Sunday they will be moved up to 2:30 and 4:30 p.m., each time at the kids' stage right next to the Jefferson County Fair Park's north entrance.

Oakley joined a barn owl named Fry Pan and a fledgling Sharp-Shinned Hawk for Thursday's show. Should weather allow, Wesley the Snowy Owl, found right in Jefferson County way out of his summer range, might join the other raptors for future shows.

Leading the educational program is Dianne Moller, a state and federally licensed raptor rehabilitator and master falconer, who founded Hoo's Woods in 1998 and has been running it for nearly two decades.

The center, located in Milton, regularly rehabilitates wild raptors who have been found injured or sick, with the goal of returning them to the wild. Sometimes, if the injuries are crippling, the birds are unable to return to the wild. Some of these become educational birds.



HOO'S WOODS

HOO'S WOODS — One of the highlights at the Jefferson County Fair this year are presentations by Hoo's Woods, an area raptor rehabilitation center. The show features a variety of these birds including Oakley the Spectacled Owl and a young sharp-shinned hawk. For more photos click [here](#).

Right now, Hoo's Woods has 10 educational birds who travel around southern Wisconsin helping Hoo's Woods teach the public about raptors and other wildlife issues, and how to protect these beautiful birds and their habitat.

Prior to the regular show Wednesday, members of the public could meet Moller and a couple of her birds in a small booth across from the dairy barn.

These included a one-year-old golden eagle whose spinal injuries rendered it unreleasable, and a turkey vulture who very much resembled the eagle except for the lack of feathers on his head.

Vultures, while generally considered ugly, serve an important cleanup function in nature, Moller noted. Able to smell a dead animal within six hours of its demise and from 5,000 feet up in the air, vultures swoop down to take care of the mess.

Opening up her regular show Wednesday afternoon, Moller started by talking about raptors in general, which share three major features. They're meat eaters (although with vultures it's dead meat they prefer, not live) with big, sharp beaks and impressive talons.

Raptors fall into five different groups: eagles (60 species), owls (223 species), falcons (37 species), vultures, and hawks (238 species).

Raptors come to the Milton rehabilitation center after being discovered by the public.

"In the wild, most raptors don't live to turn 1," Moller said, naming electrocutions, car accidents, pesticides and other environmental contaminants and general habitat loss as contributing to their early deaths.

Over the Fourth of July weekend, Moller said, her center took a lot of calls about injured owls, most hit by cars.

"We try our best to rehabilitate them," she said.

The first bird Moller introduced Wednesday was not a rehabilitated bird, however, but rather a tropical owl that had been born and raised in a zoo, and needed to find a home.

This was Oakley, the Spectacled Owl, a bird usually found in rainforests. In the wild, Spectacled Owls eat monkeys and other smaller prey. They have distinctive glasses-like markings around their eyes — hence the name.

Hoo's Woods received Oakley from a Tulsa, Okla., zoo.

Moller said that owls have 14 vertebrae in their necks, as opposed to seven in humans, and noted that one of their ears is shifted slightly higher. Both of these traits give the birds of prey a hunting advantage.

Owls see mostly in black and white, she said, while other raptors see in color.

The second animal Moller brought out was a barn owl named Fry Pan. Barn owls used to be common in this area, but now they almost entirely have vanished from the state due to changes in farming practices.

This species of owls eats up to 150 times its weight every day, playing a big part in decreasing rodent populations, she said.

Moller noted that just two mice and their offspring reproducing unchecked over three years could multiply to a population of 250 million.

Owls like the Barn Owl or the larger Barred Owls or Great Horned Owls help keep this population under control.

People think of owls as nocturnal species, and most are, but of the 223 species of owls, 80 are active during the day, such as the Snowy Owl. Barn Owls have dark eyes to aid their vision during the night, while the spectacled owl, with its yellow eyes, obviously has different habits.

The final bird Moller brought out Wednesday was a juvenile Sharp-Shinned Hawk, almost completely feathered out and full size, but not yet able to fly.

The one-month-old bird, named Prince, represents the smallest hawk species. These small hawks also are secretive, making them hard to spot in the wild.

Holding out the hawk, Moller took a few minutes to talk about falconry, the ancient sport of hunting with trained hawks or falcons.

Falconry got its start 5,000 years ago in Asia as a way for hunters to feed their families through partnering with these talented birds.

Now the sport is not commonly practiced, but the tradition remains, with some modern safeguards. To be a falconer, it requires permits, and the sport is highly regulated, with great attention paid to the well-being of the birds.

Moller has represented the United States three times at an international falconry festival, and in April of last year, she was named the Wildlife Conservationist of the Year by the Wisconsin Wildlife Federation.