

FUN, FREE and KID-FRIENDLY: Wild Bird Sanctuary Has It All

A tree-lined trail leads from the parking lot to the tall wood and wire enclosures where Gandalf, a regal Eastern Screech Owl, peered at me from behind watchful eyes. Gandalf was found by the side of the road with a fractured left humerus, presumably hit by a car. The break was so close to his elbow joint that when it healed, the bird could not fly.

And then there's Thorny, a Red-tailed Hawk, and Virgil, a Turkey Vulture (with a face only a



mother could love!). All these birds thrive under the watchful eyes of Dr. Leonard Soucy and his trained staff. They are just three of the nearly 3,000 "residents" who receive nurturing at The Raptor Trust each year. And, while the focus is on raptors—birds of prey with strong curved beaks and taloned feet—no bird, even an injured songbird, is turned away.

Protection for a Diminishing Breed

Situated under a canopy of tall trees on the edge of The Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in northeastern New Jersey, the Trust is one of the few wild bird sanctuaries in the country. Thanks to the inspiration of Dr. Soucy and his wife, Diane, the Trust became a home for sick, injured or orphaned birds. Some 20 species of owls, eagles, falcons and vultures live here either permanently or until they can be re-introduced into the wild.

The Soucys, known locally as "the bird people" began their self-financed project nearly 40 years ago. In 1968, Dr. Soucy learned there was no legal protection for raptors, which were viewed as vicious killers and, consequently, routinely destroyed. Laws have since been passed making it illegal to shoot, harm, capture or sell any bird of prey. Back then, though, the project was

the Soucys' way of offering protection, bird-by-bird, to these diminishing populations.

Educational as Well as Fun

Today the Trust is recognized as one of the premier nonprofit wild bird rehabilitation centers in the United States. In addition to 70 acres, shelter a state-seat center shop. The Education



Center caters to groups of children with displays of raptors, an extensive library and prearranged programs on subjects like "Owls of New Jersey" and "What Raptors Are". There they can learn about "Hootie", a Great Horned Owl, who served as surrogate mother to more than 300 orphaned owl chicks during her 23 years in residence. Should you find a sick or orphaned bird in your own backyard, the staff at the Trust is eager to help.

If you are looking for an enjoyable, absorbing and educational few hours—that isn't the usual fare—try The Raptor Trust. It is open every day from 9:00 a.m. to dusk, and admission is free. For directions and a wealth of useful information, go to their website at www.theraptortrust.org.

A word of caution, though: if you have a squeamish stomach, avoid the dinner hour!

The Raptor Trust is just an hour's drive from Manhattan and is located at:

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Millington,
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