

A bird's eye view of hunting

Henagar resident reflects on lifelong passion for ancient art of falconry

By Diana LaChance



Bill Lang of Henagar didn't set out to be one of only four licensed falconers in the county. But given that his love of raptors dates back to his youngest years, it may have been inevitable.

"In the early 1960s, my brother and I got some young kestrels and kept them for a year or so," says Lang. After that, "an acquaintance found a nest of red-shouldered hawks and got us some youngsters, which we kept tethered on perches in our yard."

At the time Lang could not find information on training birds of prey, so he and his brother kept them more as pets. After he graduated from college and bought a red-tailed hawk, however, he decided to take his hobby to the next level. "A friend and I had bought a paperback with a little information about training them," Lang recalls. "Even though I was mostly guessing, I had that bird about trained."

Shortly thereafter, however, he faced a setback courtesy of the federal government. "In the late 1970s, laws were passed that made it illegal to have a raptor unless you were a licensed falconer or a rehabilitator," says Lang. As a result, he was forced to put his falconry efforts on hold — until a serendipitous meeting just four years ago.

"In 2008, I was at my nephew's soccer game, and the father of classmate was there," says Lang. "He mentioned a friend of his who was a falconer, and I got in touch with him and found out what I would have to do to get licensed." It was no short order.

The first step was to contact Roger Clay, the wildlife biologist who oversees falconry, in the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division offices in Spanish Fort, Ala. Clay sent

a packet of information that included how to prepare for an extensive written test covering everything from raptors' natural history to health and diseases to hunting methods.

Lang passed the test on his first try, and then set about meeting the state's second requirement — proving he had the capability to safely house a raptor in accordance with the law. Among other things, he says, "you have to have a facility, or mew, with vertical bars and perches, as well as a bath pen." In Lang's case, Tracy Nelson, an area biologist with the Montgomery office of the Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, came out to inspect his mew.

After that hurdle was cleared, Lang was then left with one final task. "I had to be an apprentice for two years under a master falconer," he says, which posed a significant challenge given that there are less than fifty master falconers in the state. However, he managed to find a sponsor and get his first bird, a female red-tailed hawk he called Zeva.

"I trapped her in January of 2009, and I was real nervous," recalls Lang, explaining that a wild-caught bird (as opposed to a purchased, captive one) is called a passer. "There were lots of times I turned her loose that I wasn't sure she'd come back! But she turned out to be pretty good."

But not everything went smoothly at first. "Getting them to take food from you is the first step," Lang says. "That first bird, I had her six days before she would eat." Once that hurdle was cleared, Zeva got to the point where she would step into his hand for food.

After that, says Lang, "you keep extending that distance

over time, so eventually you've got it so they come back to you from 70 or 80 yards."

The real trick, however, is making sure the bird stays at a relatively low weight, called a response weight. That weight acts as a sort of guarantee that the bird will choose to accept food from the falconer rather than follow its instinct to hunt, which Lang says is only successful 10% of the time in the wild. "Even though it's the part I like least, you have to control their need for food," he explains, "so you have to weigh them every day to figure out the response weight."

In Zeva's case, her response weight was 38 ounces. "If I'd turned her loose at more than 38 ounces, I'd have been lucky if she came back," he says. Of course, it helps if the food the falconer is offering is something worth coming back for.

"From 200 or 300 yards, they can see if you have something worth coming for," Lang says. "So when she came to the lure, I made sure it was a good crop of something to eat."

Because Zeva was a passer, Lang set her free in May of that same year. Though he was sad to see her go, he says, "I got her through the hardest part of her life, that first winter."

Now Lang needed the experience of training another bird. So a few months after releasing Zeva he set out his traps once again. In September of 2009, he captured a male red-tailed hawk he named Jewitt.

"He was so easy to train," says Lang, speculating that it was because he had caught Jewitt at a much younger age than Zeva. "He caught three pheasants, three rabbits and several squirrels before I set him free."

As for what happened to the prey Jewitt captured, Lang says "they mostly ended up as his food!"

After Jewitt, Lang decided he would try training a captive bird, one who was raised by her parents in a breeding program in Georgia. "That third bird was a Harris's Hawk, which is native to the American Southwest," Lang says. "They're the most social of hawks and they hunt in families. They're so easy — that's the thing about them."

Sadly, the hawk died of West Nile virus earlier this year before Lang could fully train her.



Above: Bill Lang with Jewitt, a male red-tailed hawk he caught as a young bird and trained to hunt. He caught pheasants, rabbits and squirrels before being released.



Right: This female Harris's hawk was Lang's last bird. Here she landed in a field during a training exercise.

Now Lang must wait once again for trapping season, which runs September through January, to catch his next bird. "I am hoping to trap a Cooper's Hawk, which is a small hawk that is more common than red-tailed ones," he says. "It will be a challenge, because Cooper's Hawks are not all that pleasant to deal with. But I want to try one."

No matter what he ends up with, however, Lang says he "thanks the good Lord every day for letting wild birds be part of my life." Not only

does he enjoy witnessing their aerial acrobatics, he says, "but I've been really amazed at the level of trust I see in those birds as I train them."

And as for those who are squeamish about the killing involved, "that's part of it," says Lang. "The birds are doing what they do in the wild; they're just allowing you to be part of it."

In fact, Lang refers to falconry as "another variation of hunting."

To that end, he adds, "it's certainly not for everybody. But I'll do it for as long as I'm able." ■