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Snowbirds Love Mouse Meat

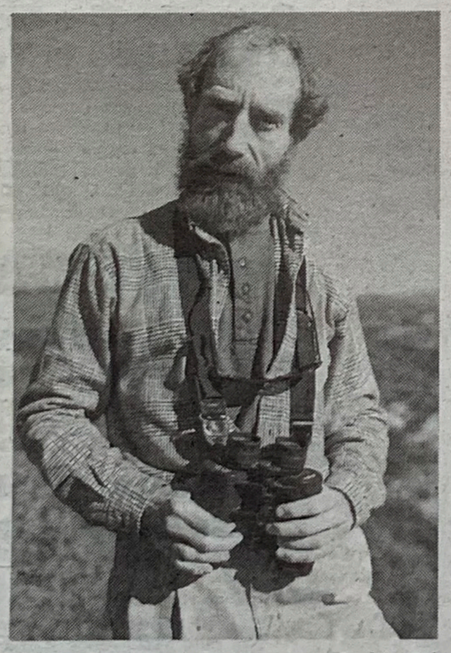
Hawk-Spotting in the Backcountry

"They're the same thing as those people in Winnebagos from Washington and British Columbia," Fred Sproul says of the migratory raptors who live and hunt in the grasslands around Ramona at this time of year. "You know — snowbirds." But the real birds' travel plans aren't as regular as those of the metaphorical retirees. "Depending on what the winters are like up north, each year down here is a little different."

Rain, rodents, and the relative growth of grasses all determine the habits of hawks and other birds of prey, according to Sproul, a biologist. Although it seems as if we've been having a drought, he says it has rained enough so that the grasses are "feeding up the rodent supply." That has meant an abundance of viewing activity on Sundays, when he and other members of the Wildlife Research Institute take people on tours. "Last Sunday," says Sproul, "was one of the most exciting hawk watches we've had, ever. The first place we stopped, there were two golden eagles flying around and some red-tailed hawks chasing them, and about 40 of us looking over this way and that way, and the excitement was at such a high pitch, we could hardly get going on the rest of the trip."

LOCAL EVENTS

While golden eagles are migratory over much of the western United States, the eagles of Ramona happen to be year-round residents, says Sproul. "They have to move out of places like Nevada and Utah. However, the golden eagles we have here are a special case."



Fred Sproul

Two pairs have occupied the grasslands for some time. "And there's a pretty sharp dividing line between the two couples. If one pair goes into the other pair's territory, it gets chased out right away."

Many tour-goers bring binoculars to watch activities that may be as far as a mile away. Others have spotting scopes and can often be counted on to share them. These are short-range telescopes with 20- to 30-power lenses.

Not infrequently, the group witnesses a rodent getting swooped down on and scooped up by talons. "Yes, indeed! We have got some stories, of eagles especially, because they're so big and powerful. We have seen them catch prey and fight over it, and then something else comes along and steals it."

But the Wildlife Research Institute isn't sponsoring these hawk watches purely for participants' enjoyment, says Sproul, who, along with the other members of the conservation group, wants to "get the word out" that the raptors are threatened.

He names the ferruginous hawk as one of Ramona's winter residents that's "a potentially threatened bird," describing it as "beautiful, very light-colored, with very long wings, elegant to see." The burrowing owl is another. "It's a little owl that burrows in gopher holes or squirrel holes. They're only eight inches tall, and they're out in the daytime, which is unusual, compared to most owls. They're very cute, and a lot of birdwatchers are keen to see one."

The way to protect these birds is to protect their habitats, says Sproul, and that includes the cliffs and trees where they nest, and the open fields where they get their food.

As Sproul likes to say, "You've got to save both the bedroom *and* the kitchen."

There has been activity in at least one eagle pair's bedroom lately. "We've seen them carrying sticks. And when we see that, we know they're building a nest and having amorous intentions. One pair is definitely building a nest right now and will probably be laying an egg by the end of the month."

The mating of these eagles is something that Sunday groups may likely witness. As Sproul describes it, "They stand on a boulder. The male gets on the female's back, and there's some tail twitching. Then the male flies off — he takes a bit of a flight — and the female does, too. They sort of straighten out their feathers. We're not sure exactly what its purpose is. Some people joke that the male goes off and has a cigarette."

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ALLEN

Golden eagle

The whole event takes "less than a minute," says Sproul. "In fact, it's usually less than *half* a minute. If we don't have enough scopes or if everybody isn't paying attention, only a few of us actually get to see it. But it's something that they do on a frequent basis during this period of the year."

Sproul himself doesn't know the reason for the frequency. He speculates that it's to insure that the egg gets fertilized or to stimulate the pair bond, or both. He says that at least two "top-notch raptor specialists" are part of their touring team, and they will be on hand to answer questions in detail on these last two hawk watches of the season.

— *Jeanne Schinto*

The Wildlife Research Institute's Hawk Watch 2001
Sunday, February 18 & 25, 9:00 a.m. to noon

Directions: take Highway 67 one mile southwest of Ramona town center. At the traffic light at the intersection, Dye Road goes south, while Highland Valley Road goes north. Meet a block north of the junction of Highway 67 and Highland Valley Road, on Highland Valley Court

Free
No reservations necessary; only constant rain cancels
Info: 760-789-8136