

THE BACK PORCH RANGER

by Melissa Kay Bishop

Volunteering at The Foundation for the Preservation of American Bald Eagles involved work with all kinds of raptors including the red-tailed hawk. Although this bird is named for his tail, like all birds of prey, they love to show off and take great care of their wings. Giving the birds a shower was one of my duties that I would have paid someone to let me do.

On several iron-ring perches sticking out of the lawn, an owl, a vulture, a kestrel, a falcon, and a hawk or two would be carefully placed. Although these foundation residents were tethered to the rings, none of the birds had an interest in leaving, but proudly sat and tried to mask their excitement. Turning a hose on one of the birds would cause her to spread out one great wing allowing me shoot water un-

der it then she would stretch out the other. Without taking her eyes off me, she would turn around to make sure I didn't forget her back. Each bird got their turn and then again. It was a summer time treat of running through the sprinkler with the purpose of keeping their greatest tools preened and in the best condition.

February and March is the time of year to witness these tools in action. As you are going along a highway, pay attention to the sky (if you are the passenger of course) for a display of the red-tailed hawk's winged prowess. You will see two or more of these birds (I have seen up to five) circling and soaring high into the blue. Diving and grazing each other, they hook talons and fall nearly to the earth before one of them lets go. The purpose of this game of

chicken is to of course, prove what their wings and talons can do to attract the opposite sex.

Red-tails used to be called the "Chicken Hawk" and not for this game, but because farmers mistakenly believed they were after their chickens. Often, they were shot for actually hanging around to take care of any rat or snake



problem the trigger-happy landowner might be having.

The red-tail hawk population is stable because they are highly adaptable and one of the rare animals that has benefited from man's destruc-

The Wings of a Red-tail

tion of the environment. The clearing of forestland for farms and miles of clean cut areas for the highway system has created the perfect hunting grounds for a bird that can spot a mouse up to a half mile away. Perched upon trees on a woody border or the handy miles of perches that we know as telephone wires, the red-tail has a per-

is on top of his prey and audibly stuns it into freezing.

Red-tails are also known to adapt well to city life as documented in the story of the most famous red-tail hawk, Pale Male. Living off the bounty of New York City's Central Park, Pale Male lives on Woody Allen's apartment building, making himself comfortable on a windowsill. His presence bothers some apartment residents, but since red-tails are federally protected, so is Pale Male's right to rub elbows with celebrities. The largest danger to New York hawks is the poison many people put out for pesky pigeons. Pigeons happen to be their main meal. Eating a poisoned pigeon is what took the life of Pale Male's mate.

Red-tails mate for life and live an average of 14 years in the wild. They form a partnership to build a nest together and care for their young. The female (or hen) is the larger of the two maybe because she is in

charge of guarding the nest while the male hunts for their food. When a mate dies, it takes a hawk a while to recover and find love again.

The red-tail hawk is a bird of power and revered for its sacred properties and attributes by many, especially Native Americans. The Chippewa tribe of the Northern Midwest believes these birds are visionaries and are totem animals that bring messages about your life purpose and show you how to spread your wings. This bird is hard to ignore especially this time of year, so take heed and hear what they have to say.

Melissa Kay Bishop is a journalist and wildlife hobbyist living in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. After years of volunteering and working with creatures great and small, she now chronicles the ones who visit her own yard. She can be reached at backporchranger@gmail.com.



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