

MIZZOU

The magazine of
the Mizzou Alumni Association

[Home](#) » [Summer 2012](#) » [Around the Columns](#) » [Enraptured with raptors](#)

Around the Columns

Enraptured with raptors

Willie the red tailed hawk was about a year old when a rural Missouri woman discovered the crippled bird. He had a broken wing, likely from being hit by a car, so she consulted the Missouri Department of Conservation. Before conservation staff could visit, she called back and lied about the bird's death. Eventually, however, neighbors learned that the bird hadn't died.

"She wanted a pet, so she kept him in her basement," says Michelle Walker, public relations coordinator at the College of Veterinary Medicine's Raptor Rehabilitation Project. "He was malnourished, and he had been suffering with no medication."

Willie arrived in Columbia in 1995, but had he come to the project sooner, he probably could have been released into the wild after a short stay. His injuries didn't heal properly, and he is now one of nine resident birds of prey at the facility.

To Walker and her colleagues, it's an important wildlife lesson reinforced by reading *Zoo Story: Life in the Garden of Captives* by Thomas French. The book describes "bunny huggers" as well-meaning animal lovers who sometimes lose sight of an animal's wild nature.



Third-year student Jeremy Mercer releases a sharp-shinned hawk following recovery at the Raptor Rehabilitation Project in the College of Veterinary Medicine. Photo by Rob Hill




Getting too attached is always a risk at the project, which rehabs and releases 80 to 100 birds annually. Most arrive with broken bones from car collisions, but a bald eagle was recently released after recovering from lead poisoning. It had eaten fish that had consumed metal sinkers and small animals hit by buckshot.

A team of 10 to 12 students — led by Marie Kerl, associate professor of veterinary medicine — nurses the birds back to health by feeding them, administering appropriate medications and gradually encouraging the predators’ flying and hunting instincts. In January, the project even coordinated a bird-release by a terminally ill human patient to fulfill her dying wish.

But if any “bunny huggers” need reminding of a raptor’s wild nature, they needn’t look further than Sir Piginous, the facility’s resident turkey vulture. The creature vomits carrion to repel its enemies, and he urinates and defecates on his feet to cool himself during the summer.

“His stomach acid can melt the paint off of cars,” says an enthralled Walker, who wrote a report on the bird in 2011. “It would probably sting if it got in your eyes, and you would want to go away.”

[More 2012 Around the Columns »](#)

 [Follow us on Twitter](#)  [Join us on Facebook](#)  [Subscribe to our feed](#)

Published by MIZZOU magazine, 109 Reynolds Alumni Center, Columbia, MO 65211 | Phone: 573-882-5916 |
E-mail: Mizzou@missouri.edu

Opinions expressed in this site do not necessarily reflect the official position of MU or the Mizzou Alumni Association.

Copyright © 2021 — Curators of the [University of Missouri](#). All rights reserved. [DMCA](#) and other [copyright information](#).

An [equal opportunity/affirmative action](#) institution.

Last updated: Feb. 15, 2013