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Contact

Melissa Weber, Director of Communications
Phone: 320-589-6414, weberm@morris.umn.edu

Jenna Ray, Editor/Writer
Phone: 320-589-6068, jrray@morris.umn.edu

An innovative learning opportunity

Summary: High school teacher Andrew Weaver '85 and his biology students raise peregrine falcons in his Stillwater classroom.

(December 19, 2005)-Andrew Weaver '85 grew up in Anoka along the banks of the Mississippi where he and his brother kept birds in their backyard. They mowed lawns for money to build shelters and buy food for the wood ducks, canvasbacks and pheasants for which they cared. Their “menagerie” provided hours of outdoor enjoyment and untold opportunities to learn. Today, Weaver is sharing his love of learning and his love of raptors at Stillwater High School where he and his biology students are raising peregrine falcons.

A lifelong interest in raptors

During Weaver’s high school senior year, a book in the library, *North American Falconry*, caught his eye. “I was amazed. I didn’t know that people still did that anymore.” Falconry, the art of flying trained birds of prey after wild quarry, dates back to 2000 B.C. China. While hunting with hawks or falcons began as a means of obtaining food, the majestic creatures soon became emblematic of nobility, the sport of kings.

One of Weaver’s teachers learned of his new interest, and offered Weaver an American Kestrel, a sparrow hawk, that had been trapped to prevent it from killing songbirds at a feeder. Weaver’s lifelong interest in raptors was ignited.

By accepting the hawk, Weaver also accepted the stringent regulations of keeping a raptor. Both the federal and state governments require a license, and the Department of Natural Resources conducts inspections. Weaver was also required to find a “sponsor,” an important requirement that pairs an experienced falconer with persons new to the sport to share knowledge and monitor the bird’s care and the falconer’s progress.

After high school, Weaver moved to Morris to begin his UMM career. He had learned of UMM’s excellent liberal arts education and its ideal location from his father, Charlie Weaver, who was then serving as a state representative and had toured Minnesota campuses. “My dad couldn’t wait to get home from UMM to tell me about the campus,” remembers Weaver. “Dad said UMM would be the perfect match for me...a beautiful small college surrounded by lots of outdoor space.”

After Weaver was settled in the dormitory, he started looking for a place to keep his hawk: “I found a perfect location right next to a huge lilac bush in Professor Dennis Templeman’s backyard. I just walked up to his house, knocked on the door and said, ‘Hey, Dr. Templeman, could I keep my hawk in your backyard?’ He said yes and for four years I was able to keep my hawk just footsteps off of campus.” Between classes, KUMM, tennis and playing guitar in Louie’s Lower Level, Weaver learned the ancient art of falconry, spending many hours caring for his hawk, training and hunting in the wide-open spaces of the prairie.

Teaching in and out of the classroom

Weaver, a biology major, had planned to become a veterinarian but changed his mind after two internships, one on each coast, enlightened him to the amount of administrative work done by veterinarians. “I decided to be a teacher, and I’ve never regretted it. I had great role models at UMM, wonderful, enthusiastic professors. Teaching is a ‘neat gig.’ I like to laugh everyday, and I do that with my high school students.”

After graduation Weaver taught in Bird Island and Blaine and attended graduate school at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Then he relocated to Texas to work with Steve Martin’s World of Bird Shows, which feature nontraditional, free-flight birds and handlers who educate audiences about birds and about conservation. It was an amazing experience for Weaver to train eagles, owls, condors, vultures and parrots. He loved it, but when a falconry friend told him about an open teaching position in Stillwater, Weaver went back to the classroom that he missed.

Weaver teaches general biology, advanced placement biology and field biology. His classes spend much time outdoors, and he has found a unique way to incorporate his passion for raptors into the classroom. In 2001 he wrote a grant to the Legislative Commission on Minnesota Resources for funding to establish a peregrine falcon breeding project at Stillwater High School. The grant process—writing, defending and testifying—was arduous but successful. For two years, Weaver organized curriculum, purchased technology and built breeding facilities on the high school grounds. Weaver’s falconry colleagues donated three pairs of breeders, and in 2003 the first chicks were hatched.

Weaver’s students are involved in all aspects of the project from monitoring incubators to raising quail for the falcons’ food. “Our peregrine project serves as a template for many classes,” states Weaver, “biology, of course, but also for environmental education and ecology. The kids see all the issues—pesticides, habitat loss, a plethora of problems—and wonder ‘why bother, just give up.’ We need to change behavior, and the success story of peregrine falcons helps do that. Instead of reading it in a book, they are seeing it live.”

The first falcons born at Stillwater were given with thanks to the falconers who provided the breeding pairs. Last year, falcons were given to the Minnesota Zoo for its bird educational programs. Arrangements are underway for next year’s brood to be the first of Stillwater High School’s falcons released into their natural habitat.

Weaver is a longtime volunteer with the Midwest Peregrine Falcon Restoration Project, which is administered by the U of M Raptor Center and the Bell Museum of National History. Peregrines were placed on the federal endangered list in 1970 after the use of DDT in the 1950s and early 1960s almost destroyed the species. By the late 1960s, there were no peregrines east of the Mississippi and by the mid-1970s only 19 pairs in the western United States. Weaver notes that falconers played a major role in recovery because they provided peregrines that had not been exposed to DDT for a captive breeding program. The peregrine was removed from the endangered list in 1999.

Weaver makes his home in Stillwater with wife Sandy and daughters Rachael (10) and Megan (8). In addition to teaching at Stillwater High School, he teaches prairie ecology and field biology for the Graduate School of Education at Hamline University and raises German Wirehair Pointer hunting dogs.

Photo: Weaver and peregrine falcon

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