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At Hawk Ridge, David Evans supervises raptor banding

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David Evans is on his perch. His lean frame is propped on the old boat seat, which is clamped to the lid of a pickle pail, which in turn is wired atop a milk crate. He rests his feet on a cardboard box that once held 24 bottles of Leinenkugel's beer.

It is from this unlikely perch that Evans, 59, oversees one of the three most productive hawk banding sites in the United States each fall. From mid-August to the end of November, Evans and his assistants band about 2,700 hawks on their southbound migration.

This is the part of Duluth's famous Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory that the public never sees. Far from the main overlook where thousands of humans migrate to watch nearly 100,000 hawks pass each fall, Evans and his band of banders labor in obscurity. Which is just fine with Evans, whose droll and irreverent nature masks a scientist's curiosity and discipline.

This is Evans' 37th year at Hawk Ridge, where his crews have banded nearly 100,000 raptors. Evans works under contract with Hawk Ridge for three and a half months each fall. To supplement his income, he also has worked for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources banding eagles, capturing ospreys for relocation and doing goshawk surveys.

On Tuesday morning, as this fall's hawk migration was still building, Evans smoked Pall Malls and kept an eye on the sky at Hawk Ridge. In a clearing outside the shack, gossamer "mist" nets were strung between poles, waiting to gently ensnare the next unwary raptor.

Though Evans remains in the background at Hawk Ridge, his work and longevity are central to the Hawk Ridge Bird Observatory.

"He is Hawk Ridge," said Debbie Waters, education director for HRBO. "He was one of the first people who was there, and he's the only one who's still there."

THE EARLY YEARS

Systematic hawk counting began at the ridge in 1972, and that's the year Evans arrived, fresh from college at the University of Wisconsin-River Falls. He had majored in agriculture, not ornithology.

"I was into cows," he said. "And sheep, some."

He had been exposed to banding through falconry, so he erected a makeshift shack and started banding hawks. For free.

"I was expecting it to be one year," said Evans, known to his colleagues as "Fud," a nickname from high school.

By banding hawks here and learning where they are later recaptured or recovered dead, ornithologists have learned a lot about when raptors migrate and where they go. Evans forwards his banding information to the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center of the U.S. Geological Survey in Patuxent, Md. The bands turn up when hawks die in Brazil, get shot in Mexico or bash into windows in Wisconsin.

"I remember a merlin that went to Florida to some Air Force base and encountered a jet engine," Evans says.

His banding of saw-whet owls solved a mystery about the unusual way in which that species molts, or sheds its feathers. Subsequent banding and research have aided in numerous research efforts, including the monitoring of avian flu.

SHOW AND TELL

Perhaps equally important, many of the hawks Evans captures and bands are used by Hawk Ridge naturalists to teach visitors

at the ridge about the ways of raptors.

“The work we do is magnified exponentially by being able to teach with a bird in the hand,” said Julie O’Connor, staff naturalist at Hawk Ridge.

Visitors are also given an opportunity to “adopt” a banded hawk to raise money for the bird observatory. And it’s impossible to know how the lives of countless young hawk watchers have been touched when they release a banded sharp-shinned hawk into the sky so it can continue its journey south.

Evans and his assistants — three of them this fall — are content to remain behind the scenes, luring hawks to their nets, weighing the birds, measuring their feathers, affixing shiny metal bands to their leathery legs. To simplify his life during banding season, Evans sleeps on a bench in the 8-by-8-foot shack.

This fall, Evans is assisted by Jared Thompson, 23, of Tampa, Fla.; John Gorey, 24, of Nashville, Tenn.; and Ryan Byrnes, 24, of Beaver Dam, Wis. They all work in the tiny shack plastered with curling snapshots, bumper stickers and clippings that seem to pertain to banding.

One reads: “Feel the thrill again and again and again. I support catch-and-release.”

LONG DAYS

The catching and releasing goes on from sunrise to sunset at the banding station. The action is weather-driven. Northwesterly winds after a cold front pepper the sky with hawks. Evans and Co. race around, plucking hawks from nets, banding, recording data and tossing birds out the shack door to fly again. Such days tax the team.

“It’s a madhouse, a zoo,” Evans said.

But other days, such as Tuesday, the banders can hardly buy a bird. Those are days that Evans catches up on chores such as repairing nets that deer have walked through or goshawks have flown through.

Everything about the banding station has Evans’ touches. Which means, most of it has been around for a long time. The tubes he uses for detaining hawks until they can be banded are pairs of old beer cans taped together.

“I made those when I came here in ’72,” Evans said.

“He was ‘reduce, re-use, recycle’ before it was cool,” O’Connor said.

Evans’ simple ways were necessary when he first arrived in Duluth and began banding without a salary. He built a ramshackle banding shelter from a single piece of plywood and some wool bags.

“He slept in the car and ate dog food or serviceberries or raspberries,” said his wife, Molly Evans.

Molly was one of the first official counters at the ridge and remembers Evans’ first years here. She liked his unassuming, straightforward ways. They were married in 1982.

“He’s very smart, but he isn’t going to let you know that,” she said. “Also, he doesn’t care what people think. He wears terrible old clothes and has a dirty old van and the lawn doesn’t get mowed when it should. He’s just interested in what he’s interested in.”

Mostly, he’s interested in raptors. During winters, he monitors snowy owls in the Duluth area. And until this past summer, he had spent part of every summer since 1970 banding eaglets in their nests.

GOOD BOSS

Evans’ assistants describe him as being laid-back and good to work with.

“He’s pretty funny and easy-going,” Gorey said. “He’s easy to talk to.”

“Every other thing he says makes me laugh,” Thompson said. “And he says it how it is. There’s no frosting on the cake. “

Evans can tell a good story, but he isn’t one to waste words.

“Fud is an introvert,” Waters said.

Both Waters and O’Connor used the same word in describing Evans.

“He’s brilliant,” O’Connor said. “He’s a man of very few words, but if you ask the right question, he will surprise you with the depth and breadth of his knowledge. But he doesn’t offer it up or parade it around. He’s very humble.”

Evans didn’t plan to spend 37 years at Hawk Ridge. But here he is, still mending nets and sleeping in the shack and keeping his records. He figures he’ll stay at it for a while.

“I’ve never had a real job,” Evans said. “Why go through cubicle stress? I’ve got my own cubicle right here.”

A long piece of ash falls from his cigarette onto his jeans. He doesn’t notice. He’s looking out the door at the sky, watching for hawks.