

GROUNDED

eagle encounters at spier

The question of raptor rehabilitation is fraught and few centres seem able to achieve results in the birds' best interests.

Andrew Jenkins visits one centre that seems to be getting it right.

Human perceptions of birds of prey are typically fuelled by passion and characterised by conflict. At once awe-inspiring and pestilent, regal and demonic, fragile and destructive, raptors and raptor matters are inherently controversial. Raptor rehabilitation is one such thorny issue, and those centres that house and treat debilitated eagles, hawks and falcons are generally subject to the full spectrum of opinions and criticism that inevitably attend a collection of captive birds of prey.

In some instances, where motives are questionable and bird and housing conditions are poor, harsh commentary is both warranted and required. But centres where raptor 'rehab' is practised competently, for the right reasons and with due regard for quality of life, can play a legitimate and valuable role in securing the welfare of local birds of prey and in spreading the conservation ethic. Eagle Encounters at the Spier estate near Stellenbosch in the Western Cape is one such centre.

As a raptor biologist whose love for birds of prey stems from experiences with wild, free-flying birds, I generally find raptor rehab and exhibition venues quite depressing. Superficially, Eagle Encounters is no exception, and the rows of tethered or caged birds lined up inside the entrance to the centre don't present

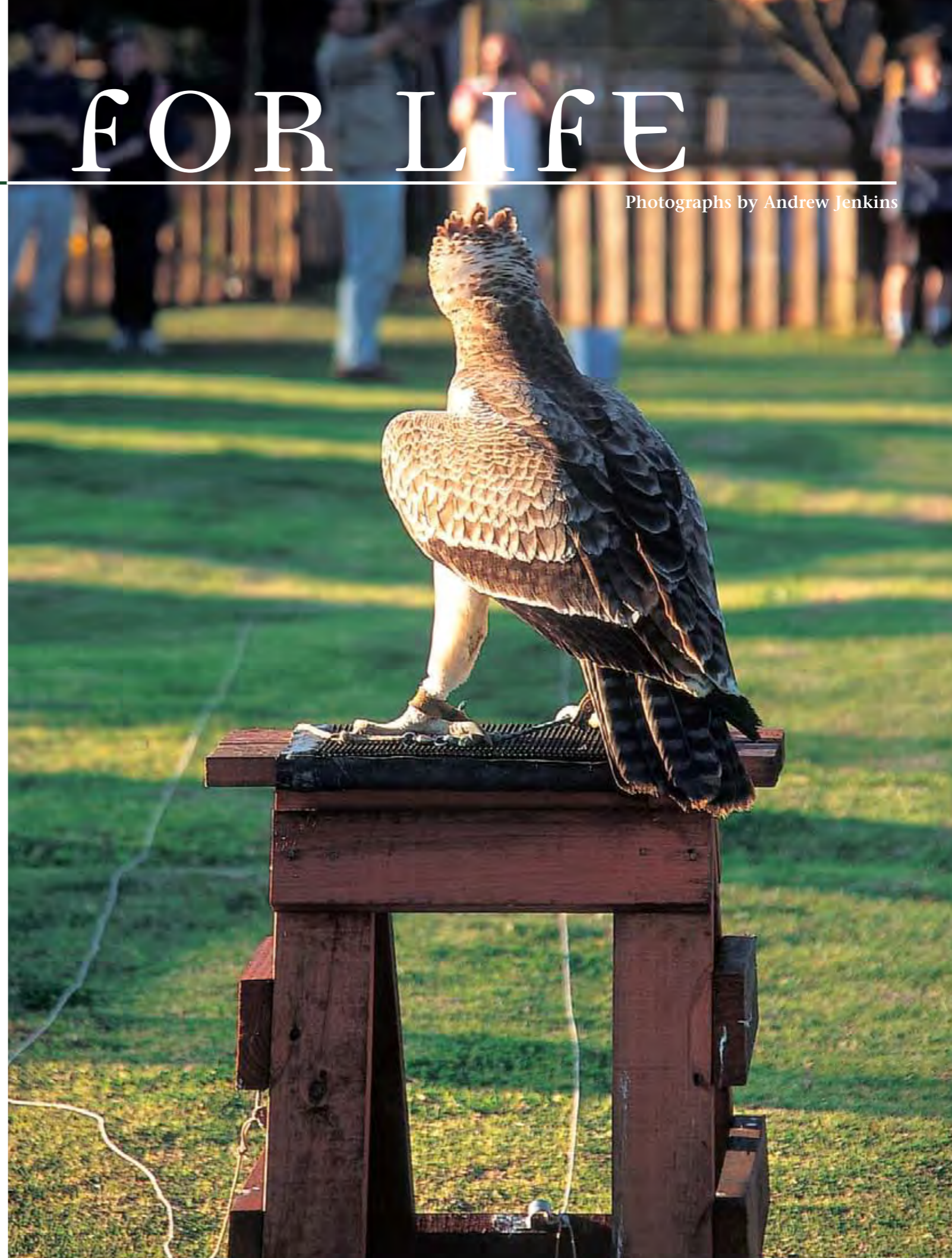
an encouraging first impression. But it is important to remember that almost all of the birds on display were picked up injured, sick or orphaned, and were brought to the centre for recuperative care. So, while none of them belongs at the centre, they all need to be there to stand a chance of successful recovery.

A second thing to note is that the birds at Eagle Encounters are generally in excellent condition. Raptors are remarkably fragile animals and when they are incorrectly managed in captivity they readily sustain additional injuries, lose condition and contract disease. The majority of birds at the Spier centre are visibly recovering or maintaining condition, and most have a sparkle in their eyes and a healthy, glossy glow to their plumage. This is a deserved reflection of the care with which they are attended, and the considerable expertise of the centre's management team, fronted by owners Hank and Tracy Chalmers, and ably assisted by Jannes Kruger.

Chalmers employs many of his skills as a falconer in running the centre. As a 'passive anti-falconer', I have reservations about overt and public displays of falconry, but have to concede that its time-honoured practices include many techniques for the handling, housing and managing of captive raptors that are simply more efficient and successful than >

FOR LIFE

Photographs by Andrew Jenkins



A juvenile Martial Eagle is put through its paces at Eagle Encounters. Falconry techniques and equipment are used extensively at the centre in an effort to ensure that all candidates for rehabilitation are properly conditioned before release.

the available alternatives. For example, many of the birds at Eagle Encounters are kept effectively grounded, tethered to falconers' block- or bow-perches out on the manicured lawns of the centre. This might seem cruel to the uninitiated, particularly when the birds repeatedly 'bate' or try to take off, but it is in fact a very good way of keeping them safely controlled. It prevents the more excitable individuals from injuring themselves (they can easily suffer cere or feather damage while crashing around in a cage, even in a shadecloth-walled enclosure), and it also allows the curator to handle and move them more easily, which is important when applying a proactive approach to rehabilitation.

This brings us to the rehabilitation process itself. This is often complex and time-consuming, and almost always requires more than simply taking an apparently healthy bird out into a field

and letting it go. Many establishments that house captive birds of prey and purport to care for raptor casualties are not really concerned with returning injured birds to the environment, either because they have a conflicting agenda or because they lack the time, resources or experience to do a thorough job. The staff at Eagle Encounters are genuinely committed to fully rehabilitating their patients and, at any given time, all but the most severely injured or otherwise incapacitated individuals are making some sort of progress towards release. Once again, falconry methods are used, and in particular the bird-hunting falcons and hawks that operate as finely tuned athletes are trained and flown regularly to help them develop sufficient strength and stamina to 'make it on the outside'. Obviously, some of the birds admitted to the centre have no prognosis for successful release. Some are received in such poor condition that they are euthanased soon after they arrive. As things stand, the centre receives and treats at least 100 raptors a year, of which perhaps 30–40 per cent are at least considered for rehabilitation. Those that can serve a useful function as display birds are consigned to a life in captivity and are either permanently accommodated at Eagle Encounters or passed on to other facilities. These birds, together with most of the rehab candidates, comprise the static display of captive raptors that is part of the commercial side of the centre. They present an impressive selection of mostly local birds of prey, arrayed for the general public to peruse. Chalmers conducts regular falconry displays, using favourites from the current class of rehab birds, in which he puts kites, owls, buzzards, falcons, eagles and even a Secretarybird through their paces and cleverly persuades them to show audiences how they would make a living in the wild.

At the time of writing, entrance to Eagle Encounters is R25 for adults and R10 for children. While a portion of the fees contributes to the considerable upkeep, maintenance and staffing costs of the centre, the remainder quite reasonably goes into keeping the Chalmers family fed and housed.

About 30 000–40 000 members of the public pass through the centre each year, experience at close quarters a range

of local birds of prey and learn something memorable and valuable about the trials and tribulations of life as a raptor. In addition to their more standard interactions with the general public, the Eagle Encounters team does some commendable education work with local schools, youth groups and centres for the physically or mentally disabled, and reaches out into agricultural communities to promote raptor-friendly farming practices. Chalmers preaches the raptor gospel to about 100 school groups and four or five farming communities each year, and doubtless sows many conservation seeds in the process. These services are not necessarily given free of charge, but they do provide considerable entertainment while delivering important environmental messages.

Although there are elements of the Eagle Encounters experience that I feel are a little too hands-on, with more falconry than I'm entirely comfortable with and perhaps too much focus on the captive animal and too little on the wild one, the centre is still developing and

expanding, and the Chalmers are at pains to stress their desire to contribute more to research and conservation.

Overall, Eagle Encounters is a shining example of how raptor rehabilitation and exhibition should be done: the balances between passion and practicality, finance and charity, and spectacle and education are all pretty much on the mark, and the birds are excellently cared for and always put first. As long as the centre continues to maintain these high standards, I can thoroughly recommend it. □

Anyone finding a sick or injured raptor in the Greater Cape Town area should contact **Hank Chalmers** at Eagle Encounters on tel. (021) 842 3684 or 082 462 5463, **Margo Wilke** on 082 480 5077, **Wayne and Jackie Furno** on 082 874 9811, or **Odette Curtis** on 083 551 3341.

Opposite above A Barn Owl contemplates life in captivity.

Opposite below A Rock Kestrel on a block perch, enjoying some time out of its weathering mews and in the sun on the lawns of the centre.

Below As part of the regular displays given to members of the public attending the centre, Hank Chalmers prepares to demonstrate the Secretarybird's amazingly accurate and powerful strike.

