Raptor rehab

One woman has made it her mission to ensure sick or injured birds of prey get back on the wing and into the wild.

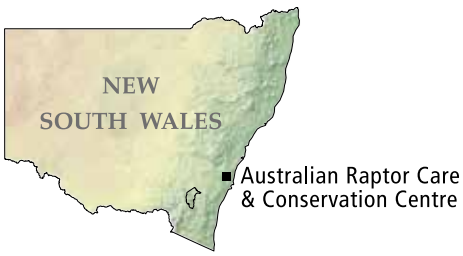
STORY BY PETER MEREDITH

Grounded by a viral disease that has warped its feathers and prevents it from flying, a wedge-tailed eagle strides the sandy floor of the huge, circular, free-flight aviary that is the centrepiece of Peggy McDonald's raptor rehabilitation centre.

STEPHEN TATTON / *Aquila audax*

Birds come to Peggy's centre with a variety of injuries, but the source of this powerful owl's suffering was a mystery. When it arrived it could not hold its head up, but x-rays showed no obvious trauma. As a result of dragging its head along the ground, it had also contracted an eye infection, which required careful treatment.

MARK KELLY / *Ninox strenua*



DUSK. ABOVE US, bats flit through the canopy, chasing insects. At ground level, the mozzies are biting. But we don't care; we have other things on our minds. We're waiting for the show to begin. We're waiting for owls.

I'm sitting beside Peggy McDonald on a fallen tree trunk. She's responsible for the scene before me and for what's going to happen. About 20m away stands a 4m-high cage, an aviary. A hatch in its side is open and Peggy's eyes are fixed on it, her compact form tense with anticipation.

She has brought me to this spot on her forested 17ha block in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales to witness a high point in her work. Peggy cares for and rehabilitates sick, injured or orphaned birds, mostly birds of prey. Her goal is always to return them to the wild.

The birds come to Peggy from wildlife rescue groups as well as individuals and bodies such as Sydney's Taronga Zoo. To house them she has 12 enclosures and aviaries of varying size. She also has a small bird hospital, a kind of intensive care unit.

The full dimensions of the cage in front of us are 15 x 5 x 4m. It's actually two separate enclosures joined together and connected by a central hatch. One is a temporary holding cage, the other a release cage from which birds fly free once rehabilitated.

The two cages attach to a circular structure that's the biggest aviary of all. One hundred metres in circumference and 6-8m high, it's the largest free-flight aviary of its kind in Australia. It's the centrepiece of Peggy's operation and a vital component in preparing birds for the wild.

This evening six young southern boobook owls that came into Peggy's care late last year will, we hope, fly from the open hatch we're watching. "They arrived as fledglings or nestlings that had come to grief," she tells me. "Four were nesting in tree hollows in areas that were clear-felled; the other two were hit by cars. Now it's their big night. Hopefully, they'll go out there and not only survive, but thrive."

I glimpse avian silhouettes darting back and forth in the release cage. Peggy can't contain her delight. "They're really zipping around in there!" she says. "They'll be looking at that open hatch. They must know something different is happening."

PEGGY'S ACHIEVEMENT WITH the bird rehabilitation facility she has created is testament to her passion for wildlife, particularly her love of the hunters of the air – eagles, hawks, falcons and owls.

Her zeal goes back to her childhood, when she and her father raised reptiles, under National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) licence, in his greenhouse. Later, having trained in medical technology, she worked at the University of Sydney's veterinary clinic for 15 years before volunteering in Borneo, at one stage helping with an orangutan rehabilitation program. In 1984 she moved to Bowral, in the Southern Highlands, where she cared for birds in an aviary she built in her backyard.

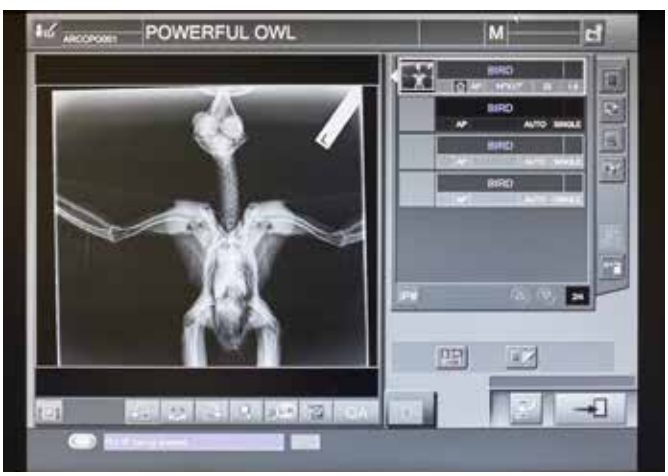
"I got involved with raptors in 1992 when I did a course with Jerry Olsen, a raptor expert at Canberra University," Peggy says. In 2011 she undertook the first of three internships at the Abu Dhabi Falcon Hospital, the largest and best-equipped facility of its kind in the world. While there, she realised how crucial the hospital's large circular aviary was for successful rehabilitation. Because it allows continuous flight – rather than the disjointed toing and froing enforced by square or rectangular cages – birds that spend time in round cages are physically fitter when released.

Peggy returned to Australia determined to build one. "I had this ambition to raise the standard of raptor rehabilitation in Australia to the gold standards that were in operation in parts of America, the Middle East and Europe. Their practices there are so good because they have long histories of falconry." By then she'd moved to her 17ha property on the edge of Morton National Park (see page 70), so space wasn't a problem. But lack of money was.

THE WEEK BEFORE the planned boobook release, I visited Peggy's rehab centre to see her at work. She does most of the daily jobs herself – the feeding and medicating of birds, the cleaning of cages and aviaries – but on the day I was there, local vet Charlie Carter arrived to give two wedge-tailed eagles a check-up.

Charlie, a fit-looking 39-year-old with an authoritative voice, has been voluntarily helping Peggy for about four years with the more specialised bird-care tasks, including the pre-admission tests that all new arrivals undergo.

Over the past three decades Peggy has Continued page 70 ▶



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ALL IMAGES BY MARK KELLY / *Aquila audax*; *Ninox strenua*

Opposite page: Clinic staff prepare to capture a wedge-tailed eagle so it can be examined (top). A regular part of raptor care includes taking blood samples and performing x-rays (bottom left) – a bird can appear outwardly healthy but harbour internal fractures. Raptors in care are susceptible to a condition known as bumble-foot, which is similar to bed sores. Because birds with injured feet often cannot hunt and feed themselves, this ailment is carefully monitored.

This page: Birds, such as this powerful owl (left), are anaesthetised to minimise stress during check-ups. A Pacific baza (below), a kind of hawk, was brought in after someone had imped some of its wing feathers clumsily – imping involves repairing damaged feathers by splicing undamaged feathers into them. Peggy and Charlie (bottom) examine some of the feathers the baza moulted while under treatment.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: MARK KELLY; *Ninox strenua*; ESTHER BEATON / *Aviceda subcristata*; ESTHER BEATON

Treatment includes keeping affected birds in rehab until they moult and grow new, healthy feathers.

looked after thousands of birds. On the day I dropped by she had 30 in her care, including more than 20 raptors.

"Most birds that come to me have been hit by cars," she said. "Some have been caught in rabbit traps or barbed wire; some have flown into wind turbines; some have been shot; some young birds become separated from their parents."

In recent years some wedge-tailed eagles have arrived with deformed feathers that prevented them from flying. Peggy and Charlie suspect the cause is beak-and-feather disease, a viral condition carried by parrots and cockatoos. Eagles may be catching it from the birds they hunt. Peggy said that for the moment treatment includes keeping affected birds in rehab until they moult and grow new, healthy feathers. Some do well and can be released; others don't and must be put down.

Two wedgetails that were doing well were in the big circular aviary when I was there. Peggy and Charlie wanted to inspect their wing feathers, which would involve catching them and restraining them.

From outside, the circular aviary looks vast. Its predominant colour is the light green of the shadecloth that lines the interior to prevent flying birds from damaging their feathers against the exterior steel-threaded bird netting. In the airy interior, your eye fixes on the tall pavilion in the centre of the sandy floor. This 8m-high, shadecloth-wrapped structure encourages birds to fly around in a circle rather than back and forth. It does this by preventing them from seeing an endpoint they can aim for.

The fact that this giant aviary exists and is functioning means Peggy succeeded in finding the money for it. She started by selling cakes and jams on the streets of Moss Vale, then approached Wingecarribee Shire Council, local organisations and prominent figures such as the late author Bryce Courtenay and publishing magnate James Fairfax. Local tradie Ross Robinson donated his skill and much labour for the aviary's construction, beginning in 2012. The late Australian 'clown doctor' Peter Spitzer offered Peggy such inspiring personal support that she named the aviary after him.

In April 2015, as part of her mission to improve raptor rehabilitation in Australia, Peggy founded Australian Raptor Care and Conservation (ARCC). This volunteer-run body aims to increase knowledge of raptor care and spread it among researchers, rehabilitators and wildlife rescue groups. The goal is to ensure injured birds have the best chance of surviving. Peggy, Charlie and six others are founding members.

The wedgetails in the big aviary were in mid-moult and couldn't fly. So Peggy and Charlie walked after each in turn as it loped along the sand, cornered it and subdued it with a towel over its head. Then Charlie spread the wings one by one and checked the flight feathers.

While this was happening, a peregrine falcon was flying laps above, highlighting the aviary's prime function – as a gym where birds train for freedom. "Birds of prey need to be 100 per cent fit to survive in the wild, especially these fast-flying falcons," Peggy said. "So this aviary gives them a much better chance."

DUSK. AS WE WATCH the hatch, Peggy tells me she's confident the time is right for the boobooks to fly free. They're at an age when they'd normally leave their parents; they're fit and know how to hunt, having practised on beetles and crickets in their cage; the weather is good and the NPWS has postponed a planned burn-off nearby.

"The planets have aligned and tonight's the night," she says. We don't have to wait for long.

"There's one!" Peggy exclaims excitedly as an owl alights on the edge of the hatch. "And another one! Look at their little heads bobbing around. Those circular head movements mean they're getting their bearings, not sure what's going on. This is so lovely."

Seconds later there are three, then four, lined up at the hatch. One flaps out to perch on a steel support cable before venturing onto the cage roof. The others follow. Soon all are out and exploring farther and farther, flying from one tree to the next into the depths of the national park. Within minutes they're out of sight and soon their twittering fades away.

Peggy says that in Australia little is known about how rehabilitated raptors fare after their release. The only way to find out would be to use satellite tracking, and that's next on her shopping list (see page 124). "We need to raise the money. We've researched all the tracking devices and have all the necessary approvals in place."

For the moment she's satisfied that she's done her best. "Seeing something like this makes all the hard work melt away. Whether it's little guys like these, a magnificent wedgetail or anything in between, it's a wonderful journey to be a part of." AG

SEE MORE of Esther Beaton's images of raptors at: *www.australiangeographic.com.au/issue135*

ESTHER BEATON / *Aquila audax*

Recovering from beak-and-feather disease – a virus that wedge-tailed eagles can catch from the parrots and cockatoos they prey upon – these two wedgies must shed their damaged feathers and grow new ones before they can fly once more. They often hop up to the top of this stump where they practise flapping their wings.