

THE TRAVELOGUES

NICK YELL

Truly special place where human spirits soar on wings of an eagle

Thrilling encounters with sky lords at raptor rehabilitation centre

If you've never had a large bird of prey fly centimetres above your head, or stared an eagle in the eye at close quarters, then it could be time you got down to the Eagle Encounters bird of prey rehabilitation centre just outside Plettenberg Bay.

That's, of course, if you're as fascinated by these avian hunters as I am.

Waiting for the flying display to begin, we ambled around the centre, taking in the various birds of prey on display in their outdoor camps and enclosures. As a layman, you may wonder how fair it is to tether these raptors to their perches but, as was explained, these birds are not able to be released (due either to some permanent handicap or because they've become "imprinted" on humans) and are quite at ease in their captive environment.

And when you hear the centre's Dennis Robson speak about one of his charges for the first time,

you're immediately aware of his love for his chosen profession. Birds of prey are his life. The passion just oozes out of him and his empathy for the birds seems to come from an intuitive place deep in his being. His relationship with them reminded me of

“His empathy for the birds seems to come from an intuitive place deep in his being

the connectedness between all living creatures – and how little we nurture this tenuous, invisible chord.

For me, the most impressive bird that Robson "flew" for us that day was the Jackal Buzzard. It's a bird which has a ubiquitous presence in my native Overberg, and I've often seen them sitting on the telephone

poles, or "sky perching" as they search for prey in the rolling wheat fields.

But it's a very different experience when you see this magnificent bird close-up, not to mention how you feel when it skims the top of your head on its flight path to and from Robson's leather gauntlet.

But the rehabilitation of wild birds or animals is not without controversy. A brief survey on the internet clearly shows various schools of thought on how, and even if, they can be successfully rehabilitated and then released.

Yet, if you consider that it's primarily the result of negative human impact – either deliberate or accidental – that causes birds of prey to require rescuing in the first place, then surely we have a responsibility to make amends through rehabilitation and increased awareness.

The original Stellenbosch-based branch of



OFF YOU GO: Eagle Encounters' Dennis Robson "flies" a rock kestrel.

Eagle Encounters, founded by Hank and Tracy Chalmers in 2001, reportedly releases about 60% of the 200 to 300 birds taken in annually. No small number. While Eagle Encounters in Plett currently only has basic rehabilitation facilities on-site, meaning some of their more serious cases still need to be referred to Stellenbosch, plans are afoot to change this.

The centre's Janet Forrest explained: "A crucial addition to our existing facilities is the development of a fully-fledged rehabilitation facility. This would include a clinic to enable us to give optimal care and attention to rescued birds, as well as an adequate housing facility for birds in recovery. But, as a non-profit organisation dependant on admission fees, donations and sponsorship, funding this addition remains challenging for us."

Apart from rescuing birds of prey and rehabilitating them wherever possible, education and conservation awareness are some of Eagle Encounters' other key objectives. And, while adult tourists make up the bulk of the paying public that sustains the centre, the managers are acutely aware of the need to educate children as well.

"We are committed to educating our future generations by providing a personal and hands-on learning experience. We provide a platform for children to experience and understand birds of prey. With knowledge, every child has the ability to make a contribution to the preservation of our wildlife," said Forrest.

After a spectacular display of flying (we saw five raptor species put through their paces) I got



WATCH OUT!: A lanner falcon's flight path causes a guest to duck.



MAJESTIC: Dennis Robson with a crowned eagle which sadly died recently.

an inkling of what drives Robson's passion. I came away believing it had something to do with the fact that observing these masters of the sky

echoes the pulse and perfect balance of nature we seek for ourselves. And, of course, who wouldn't like to soar like an eagle?

TRAVEL ADVISER

HOW TO MAKE A BOOKING

EAGLE Encounters is based at The Heath (seven kilometres outside of Plettenberg Bay on the way to Knysna), a novel combination of a farm stall, restaurant, furniture shop and a number of outdoor activities suitable for the whole family. For enquiries or group bookings, call Janet Forrest on 044-532 7537 or 083-382 2417, or visit www.eagleencounters.co.za. To report injured raptors, call Dennis Robson on 083-561 0973 or email dennis@eagle-encounters.co.za



UP CLOSE: Visitors are able to let the birds perch on their gloved hands.