



# RAPTOR FEST

*—winter festival celebrates birds of prey*

By Laurie LaFond

Winter in Fort Edward: crystal clear, star-filled nights; cold, sunny days spent bundling up and bracing against the bitter wind; snowy landscapes, and...a raptor festival. A what, you ask?

Just when you thought you'd heard of everything, along comes something else to expand your horizons. If asked what hearty northern New Yorkers do to enjoy winter, you'd expect answers like skiing, snowshoeing, snowmobiling, and maybe somebody would even toss out the possibility of a polar bear swim. Hey, as long as these things are accompanied by a cup of hot cocoa, why not? But in Fort Edward, NY, a rural part of western Washington County, nothing says mid-winter fun like Winter Raptor Fest.

This year marks the second annual Winter Raptor Fest: a gathering to celebrate the existence of birds of prey. The festival returns to the heart of the Washington County Grasslands Important Bird Area (IBA) on March 10 & 11.

short-eared owl



Gordon Ellmers

This exciting event, which features live owls, hawks and falcons, is part of a mission to raise public awareness of, and protection for, state-endangered short-eared owls and other at-risk birds that depend on the Washington County Grasslands IBA for their survival.

At the festival (held at the Gallup Ridge Farm in Fort Edward), trained hawks and owls demonstrate their aerial agility as they navigate obstacles formed by human volunteers during an amazing free-flight raptor show. In addition, live bird of prey programs presented by Adirondack Wildlife Refuge & Rehabilitation Center, The Wildlife Institute of Eastern NY, New York State Wildlife Rehabilitation Council and North Country Wild Care offer fun and educational opportunities to see and learn about many of the owls, hawks and falcons native to the Washington County Grasslands IBA.

Visitors can sign up for a guided snowshoe walk to look for wintering owls, harriers and other at-risk birds in their natural habitat. Or they can take a horse-drawn sleigh ride through the winter landscape for a unique oppor-

tunity to experience the area for themselves. Exhibitors, vendors, youth snowshoe races and other activities for kids round out this fun and exciting weekend where raptors rule! No fee is charged to attend the event, but donations are suggested.

## The “Why” Behind the Fly

More than a decade ago, Audubon New York designated a core area of grasslands in Washington County as an Important Bird Area. This designation is a National Audubon Society program to identify areas that support endangered bird species or significant populations of breeding and wintering birds. The Washington County Grasslands IBA does both.

In fact, this IBA is critical to the survival of endangered short-eared owls in New York State. And while it is important to short-eared owls, it also provides important habitat for almost a dozen other threatened and at-risk grassland-dependent birds, including northern harriers, upland sandpipers, American kestrels, eastern meadowlarks and grasshopper sparrows.



## Avian Ambassador

This shy little owl, one of the few state-endangered short-eared owls in captivity, was one of the stars at last year’s Winter Raptor Fest. His career as an avian ambassador began after he survived being hit by a car and sustained injuries too severe to allow him to be released back into the wild. Car strikes are all-too-common causes of injuries and deaths for short-eared and other owls. He came with Kelly Martin, President of New York State Wildlife Rehab Council, to help Friends of the IBA educate people about the Washington County Grasslands IBA’s critical importance to the survival of short-eared owls in New York State.



Connie Bush

Trained hawks and owls demonstrate their aerial ability with the help of human volunteers.

Short-eared owls and state-threatened northern harriers need large, grassy open areas for several reasons. They both hunt primarily “on the wing” (while flying). They are specially adapted for flying low over the ground so they can surprise mice and voles that are their usual prey, and which grasslands provide in abundance. Finally, they nest and roost on the ground, like many of the other at-risk birds previously mentioned, which makes them vulnerable to habitat fragmentation. Think about a mouse’s chance of evading your cat if they were to be locked in a closet together, as opposed to being together in a huge hayfield: the larger space provides greater protection from predators.

The largely agricultural base of the communities that comprise the IBA (primarily Fort Edward, but also parts of Argyle and Kingsbury) has preserved this area as one of the largest grasslands in eastern New York. Many agricultural practices (including hay production and pasture) maintain habitat for wildlife in early successional stages like grassland. In so doing, these practices provide ecological benefits to grassland-dependent wildlife. But a declining agricultural base has meant that early successional habitat is disappearing quickly in New York, and is turning into shrubland and young forest stands. High costs and slim profit margins are driving many local farms out of business. Many area residents want to preserve the rural character of their communities, but they are already dealing with tough economic conditions and difficult budget choices.

DEC and other conservation partners, including the non-profit organization Friends of the Washington County Grasslands IBA, would like to see this area conserved as wildlife habitat. DEC has proposed the creation of a new grassland-focused Wildlife Management Area or Unique Area that would protect approximately 2,000 acres of land through fee acquisition. An additional 2,000 acres of land could be preserved

eastern meadowlark



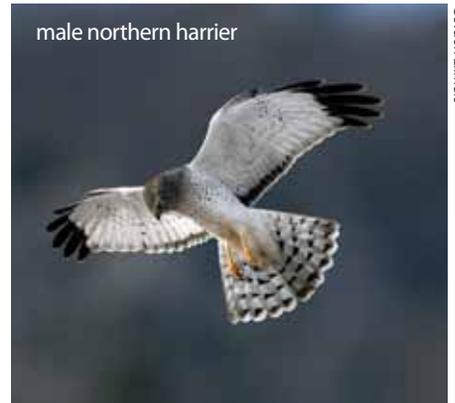
Gordon Ellmers

short-eared owl



Jeff Nadler

male northern harrier



Gordon Ellmers



Connie Bush

The festival has something for everyone—even a horse-drawn sleigh ride to experience the birds’ own environment.

through an agricultural conservation easement. To date, approximately 260 acres in the southern portion of the Washington County Grasslands have been purchased and protected by The Nature Conservancy—the first steps in making this goal a reality. Wildlife surveys conducted by DEC, Audubon New York and the Southern Adirondack Audubon Society have helped identify which specific areas are most important for rare grassland birds and wintering raptors. This information will guide future land conservation efforts.

But the battle to conserve this area is not yet won. Development pressure in this area threatens to replace wildlife habitat with housing and retail space. For conservation to succeed, it must benefit local communities. More than 10,000 people have attended Winter Raptor Fest, which is co-sponsored by Washington County Tourism Association. Other Friends of the IBA live bird of prey events, co-sponsored with the City of Glens Falls and the New York State Museum in Albany, have promoted interest in this area. Local businesses are already feeling the benefits, reporting increases in sales and foot traffic. Room reservations for Winter Raptor Fest 2012 and inquiries for dining recommendations are already coming in.

There are other partners in this effort to conserve the area as wildlife habitat. A joint collaboration between USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service, DEC and Audubon New York will help farmers and interested landowners learn about conservation easements and encourage practices that will help short-eared owls and other at-risk grassland birds.

Bringing together local farmers, willing landowners, and those who love watching birds, scientists hope that significant habitats like these can be conserved for future generations to enjoy as much as we do today.

**Laurie LaFond** is founder, president and acting director of Friends of the Washington County Grasslands IBA.

female northern harrier



grasshopper sparrow



## FOR MORE INFORMATION:

Winter Raptor Fest is co-sponsored by Friends of the Washington County Grasslands IBA, and the Washington County Tourism Association.

**GlensFallsRegion.com** is a business sponsor.

To learn more about the birds at risk, their habitat, and upcoming events and activities, visit [www.winterraptorfest.com](http://www.winterraptorfest.com). For more information about the festival, contact the tourism association at 518-499-2435, or send an e-mail to [info@winterraptorfest.com](mailto:info@winterraptorfest.com).

