

## Sometimes, INDOT Is Truly for the Birds

INDOT maintains interstates and highways, not Sesame Street, but our association with big birds carries on, regardless.

Falcons, hawks and owls — we have them all. Some are found by INDOT crews on our roadways, lying injured.

Those in the Seymour District point to Communications Director Annie Walker's falconry program for raising awareness that birds can be saved. Walker, who presents falconry programs at county fairs and other events, has also presented a program with her two hawks at the Seymour District employee picnic.

"My husband and I are big bird advocates," said Walker, referring to Zach, a conservation officer for the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR). "I use a Harris hawk for falconry, and also his bird, which is a goshawk."

Falconry is the taking of wild quarry in its natural state and habitat by means of a trained raptor.

Walker's Harris hawk is named Gabby. Born in captivity, she now weighs 2 pounds. Harris hawks are not native to Indiana and are typically found in the Southwest.

This summer, the Walkers traveled to Wyoming for not only vacation, but to find another goshawk for their falconry program.

"We hiked 15 miles together looking for nest sites, and my husband walked 10 additional miles by himself," said Walker. "Unfortunately, the pine beetle has really hurt the habitat out west, so of the dozen nest sites that we found, all were abandoned."

The Walkers wanted to pull a young raptor still in the nest, not yet able to fly. About 70% of birds of prey die during their first year in the wild. Per U.S. Fish & Wildlife regulations, falconers with approved permits may take birds younger than age 1 to help them get past the more difficult timeframe for survival. Wild-caught raptors can later be released into the wild in their native areas of habitat. Their instincts stay intact and are never lost despite being in captivity. The drive to hunt is always there, and falconry is a tool to help them finetune their hunting skills.

On the way home from Wyoming, the Walkers had to settle by purchasing a goshawk from a breeder in St. Louis. They are in the process of training the new goshawk.

Last fall, Seymour District Bridges and Herbicide Crew Leader Billy Smith called Walker when he found an injured owl on the U.S. 50 Bypass in Jennings County. Smith remembered Walker's bird



*Annie Walker and her 2-pound Harris hawk, Gabby, who was born in captivity.*

showcase at the district picnic. Walker evaluated the owl and contacted a raptor center, where the owl was treated and rehabilitated before being released back into the wild.

## Milton-Madison Bridge Falcons

The Milton-Madison Bridge, which INDOT shares responsibility for with the Kentucky Transportation Cabinet, has been known as a peregrine falcon hangout for years. Since 2002, peregrine falcons have made the bridge their nesting spot. A nesting box set up by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources ensures that the raptors will keep coming back.



*Peregrine falcons at the Milton-Madison Bridge.*

Every year, a male and female adult falcon arrive, eggs are hatched, and new chicks are born. There even is a Facebook page — Guardians of the Milton-Madison Bridge — that chronicles the falcons' movements.

Peregrine falcons are no longer on the endangered species list, but they are federally protected.

## Other Bird Sightings

- This spring, adult hawks took up residence in a nest on the camera tower where I-70 meets the Sam Jones Expressway on the west side of Marion County. They produced [two hatchlings](#) that finally flew the coop this summer but not before Indianapolis TV stations featured them.
- Fort Wayne Subdistrict Operations Manager Jason Caskey helped save an owl along I-69 in 2016. Last year, he was [reunited with the owl](#).
- Our Site Assessment Management team knows all about big birds. Members check for the presence or absence of birds on the state endangered species or special concerns lists when they conduct red-flag investigations for hazardous material.
- During planning and construction, INDOT must consider the bald eagle, which is protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. The DNR is the source of information regarding known nesting sites. INDOT can't engage in any activity within the protected zone around the nest during nesting season, from mid-January to the end of July. This limits when and where INDOT can remove trees, and the timing of the construction activity. For example, recently at a State Road 67 bridge replacement site in Greene County, INDOT completed an Incidental Take Analysis and determined that the construction would not impact the nest. It was located on the other side of a woodlot, outside of the required 660-foot buffer and would be shielded from the site. A second nest site was located closer than 660 feet. The State Road 67 work could not take place during the nesting season. INDOT also had a mitigation site for the current I-69 Finish Line project in Morgan County that required tree removal. To protect the bald eagle, we removed the trees outside of the nesting season and retained a buffer to safeguard the nest from the project.



*The Fort Wayne District's Jason Caskey (left photo) is reunited in 2019 with the owl he saved along I-69 in 2016. A mother hawk raises her chicks in an I-70 nest this spring (right photo).*

