

## “Birdman” Breeds And Sells Owls, Falcons

Tom Cullen from Goshen, N.Y., says his love of birds led to an unusual sideline business. He breeds and sells owls and falcons, some of which are very rare.

“Outside of zoos, which don’t often have excess birds to sell, I’m one of only three Eurasian Eagle Owl breeders in this country,” he explains, noting that the birds have the world’s largest 6-ft. wing span. “I’m one of only two producing Spectacled Owls, and the only person producing White-faced Scops Owls.

“My birds come from a combination of the original stock that existed in this country, and some imported birds,” Cullen says.

“I have four pairs of Eagle Owls with three independent genetic lines. I have three pairs of Spectacled Owls, one of which is genetically independent. I have two pairs of White-faced Scops, all of which have some common genetics. I also have a pair of Steppes Eagles that I’m hoping to breed.”

Cullen also breeds three species of Falcons - the Lanner, Barbary and Saker. Currently, he produces and sells about 20 birds per year.

Buyers are predominantly wildlife edu-

cators, nature centers, zoos, falconers and some hobbyists who are into breeding rare birds.

Some of these raptors are used in pest bird control programs at stadiums, vineyards, landfills, airports, oil refineries and power plants.

They vary in price from \$2,000 to \$3,500 per bird, depending on the species. Cullen says no federal permit is required to own the birds, but state requirements vary.

He sells his birds to buyers from all across the U.S., and ships them by air - or people are welcome to come and pick them up.

“Raising birds started as a hobby of mine. These species have been getting scarcer over time because they’re not being replaced,” Cullen explains. “I like to educate kids and expose them to tame owls. I do a lot of free talks to non-profit organizations, as well as offering paid programs for schools and camps. I have a variety of birds that I bring with me such as a Tawney Eagle and three species of Falcons.”

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Some of Tom Cullen’s owls and falcons are very rare.



Owl breeds include Eurasian Eagle, Spectacled, and White-faced Scops.



Pickup is equipped with a propane-fired air cannon, a siren box, and handheld spotlights, among other things.



## Bird Control On Wheels

Cliff Varner of Wichita, Kansas, has what it takes to convince pest birds to relocate, thanks to his two well-equipped mobile “weapons”. From October until May, he uses his specially outfitted 2000 Ford Excursion SUV and 1999 Ford 350 pickup to send pest birds a message: “You’re not welcome here. Move on out.”

Crows, especially, are juvenile delinquents with wings, according to Varner, who operates Rocking V Enterprise. He specializes in all kinds of problem wildlife control but during migratory season, is kept busy with crows, starlings and grackles.

“I work for various Wichita corporations, businesses and individuals, including town shopping malls, hospitals and the downtown areas. I haze problem birds out of these areas so they can no longer create health problems or make large messes,” says Varner. “They love to congregate in huge, noisy mobs. My pickup is equipped with a propane-fired air cannon, a 100-watt siren box which has an air horn/emergency light system built in, and hand-held spotlights, just to name a few things. Some of my techniques include amplifying a recording of a distressed crow, or I do a loud, verbal, shrill predator whistle.”

He’s learned to recognize the birds’ flight

patterns, a skill necessary to “outsmart” the intelligent birds.

Varner says one key to success is using different techniques at different times of day, eliminating all predictability. Weather conditions also make a difference to what will be the most favorable action.

Sometimes he employs lasers, sometimes a pyrotechnic device, and sometimes sounds that are only audible to the birds. Varner’s vast array of tools also includes some that he prefers to keep to himself until they’re patented.

He often uses up to four people and vehicles at a time to direct the birds by blocking the destinations they initially prefer.

Varner often works after dark, crawling down the streets at 5 mph. By shining his spotlight on buildings, he can locate the problem birds. They can hide in trees, inside balconies, or on the top of flat, black asphalt roofs.

“Since crows are extremely smart, they are hard to control. The key is to vary your approach and know when to do it. After a while, they can just get used to the distressed crow noises, so there has to be movement, too,” he explains. “Using launchers, I can shoot projectiles into the air that whistle and scream as they travel along. I also have a pistol that I fire with blank cartridges. The propane-fired

## Bird Guide Business Is Flying High

Jean Legge may not be getting rich guiding bird watchers to rare prairie sparrows, but the North Dakota bird guide is having fun. Eventually she may try to make it a full-time business, but part-time is enough now for the high school science teacher. She offers specialized day trips for individuals and groups, targeting specific species.

“I have people calling from all over wanting me to guide,” she says. “I have someone flying in from New Mexico. He will stay two days and then fly home. I have others coming from California. We have birds like the prairie sparrow that they want to add to their life lists.”

To a dedicated birder, a “life list” is literally the list of all the birds they have seen in their lifetime. Adding a new one is an important goal. Legge will cover 200 miles in a day with her clients as she seeks out areas with birds they wish to see.

Legge gets most of her business from her web page and memberships in a number of birder organizations. While North Dakota sloughs and potholes are filled with ducks and other birds, it’s the prairie sparrow that is a major draw. Legge specializes in the elusive bird, and North Dakota is a great place to see them.

Birds are not all she talks about with cli-

ents. “As we drive, people like hearing about the geology and history of the state, too.”

Legge once gave her knowledge away. In the early 1990s, she did volunteer work with different federal wildlife agencies. When she was asked to train an agency biologist, she got to thinking that he would get paid for what she was teaching him. She decided to do something for herself with her knowledge. Today she charges \$200 a day, which includes transportation.

“Most bird guides I have heard of charge between \$200 and \$250 a day,” she says. “You meet a very nice bunch of people, lots of retired married couples who like to bird watch together. Some older folks can’t hear very well. I bird by ear, so I can help locate the birds for them. People get excited about seeing them.”

Meeting nice people and getting paid for it is rewarding, but that’s only part of the job’s benefits. “We get out into remote areas, and it’s really beautiful,” she says. “I don’t get tired of it.”

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air cannon also makes a loud BOOM, and sends large blue flames shooting out.”

Varner’s “in-your-face” approach to crows seems a strange and sometimes disturbing sight to unsuspecting people who happen to come across him. He places a sign at the back of his vehicle to caution them: “Commercial Wildlife, Bird Control, Stay back 50 feet.” He also has a light bar installed for directing traffic away from his reconnaissance vehicle.

Varner calls 911 to let the operators know he’s working in an area to prevent false alarms.

He once had someone pull a gun on him, and a different time, a group of men surrounded his vehicle. He admits that his outfit comes across as just a bit “aggressive” to some, but most understand once he explains what he’s doing and that the birds aren’t harmed. Many people, grateful for his services, have stopped to offer him refreshments or shake his hand.

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