

# The Aviary at Rocky Gap State Park

Written by: **Sam Dixon**

## THE SCALES & TALES PROGRAM TAKES NEW FLIGHT

There is nothing quite like the experience of locking eyes with a bald eagle or hearing the call of an owl in the early moments of dawn. While these may be everyday occurrences at the office for the park rangers at Rocky Gap State Park, they'll tell you that these experiences never lose their magic. Luckily, the Aviary within the park isn't just for the park rangers, it provides a public viewing area of the park's non-releasable birds of prey who act as ambassadors to the Scales & Tales program. One of the flagship programs of the Maryland Park Service, Scales & Tales got its start in 1986 and has grown from one central location to multiple locations throughout Maryland. The "scales" in the name represent the stories of the animal ambassadors of the program while the "tales" tell the stories of how the animals came to reside in the park, and how humans have impacted their lives. Though this program has gone through many changes over the decades since its inception, Scales & Tales has always strived to afford people the opportunity to see wildlife up close, and encourage people to enjoy and appreciate Maryland State Parks and the wildlife living in them. There are not many better ways to learn about the natural world than through meeting some of the most captivating creatures that call the ecosystems of Maryland home. Fortunately for visitors to the park, the Aviary is home to several species of raptors, including four different types of owls as well as hawk, falcon, vulture, and eagle species, all on display within the campground.

## SCIENCE CREATES MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIPS

From day one, Scales & Tales created a space for the public to gain knowledge about the animals in its care, but the visitors haven't been the only ones doing the learning. Through the years, the program has also sought to provide a space for its animal caretakers to learn the best practices in animal welfare, and adapt to do the best they can by their animals. This constant search of knowledge has led the Rocky Gap Aviary team to forge partnerships with some incredible people and organizations in the



**Mature Bald Eagle, Mo, is one of two Bald Eagles at the Rocky Gap Aviary. PHOTO BY SAM DIXON**

field of avian care. Two new partners are the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators (IAATE) and Florida based Natural Encounters Inc. (NEI). While IAATE was founded to "foster communication, professionalism and cooperation among those individuals who serve Avian Science through training, public display, research, husbandry, conservation, and education," NEI's complimentary goals are "to Engage, Inspire, and Empower audiences and animal professionals all over the world by teaching the art of training and the science of behavior change." The experts from these organizations have raised



**Selma, a Black Vulture, is a very willing ambassador at the Aviary. Here she demonstrates stepping on the scale for her daily weigh-in and reward from Ranger Sam Dixon.**

*PHOTO BY MIKE CALHOUN*

the bar on what the humans and birds involved in Rocky Gap State Park's Aviary are capable of, and the team that cares for these avian ambassadors are thriving under their mentorship. Where does a partnership between world class bird trainers, park rangers, and Scales & Tales avian ambassadors begin? Where all great partnerships start – communication.

## CREATING TRUST

Rangers have long-since communicated to park visitors that avian ambassadors are the “partners” of their human caretakers, and that has never been the case more so than now. As Aviary staff started on their new bird training endeavors, they'll tell you that the art of communication has been at the basis of every other skill and technique they have learned. That new level of communication is not only with their fellow human coworkers, but the ones with feathers too. No, this doesn't mean the park rangers are actually speaking to the birds, but that doesn't mean they aren't communicating. Through the IAATE and NEI bird training mentors, who have spent decades refining their skills, the Aviary staff learned that taking the time to stop and observe the behavior of their birds provides a higher level of communication than they could have ever imagined. This moment of pause in the bird trainer also provides a

key piece of communication to the bird itself, and that is they get to choose what happens next. By always allowing the bird to choose the next step forward, or backward, a trust is formed with the animal and caretaker that allows both to gain confidence in each other and the new tasks at hand. Just like each person involved, each bird learns at a different pace and responds to new tasks with different levels of confidence. Some birds require an added level of change in their environment, also called their “antecedents,” to make learning tasks easier while other birds

work on new tasks with gusto. Regardless of how long or how many steps it takes to get to the end goal, it is the responsibility of the trainers to learn and observe the bird's behavior to help them achieve the goal at their own pace.

All of this means when you visit Rocky Gap State Park and meet the ambassadors living in the Aviary, whether they are outside presenting a program or weighing themselves on a scale, the bird chose to be there and participate. While hearing the term “animal training” may evoke images of bears on bicycles or dogs jumping through hoops, the tasks being trained in the Aviary look very different. Each task that is learned by one of the avian ambassadors provides an opportunity to increase the bird's overall quality of life as well as enhance their job as an educator. For example, easily getting a bird's weight will help trainers determine a daily diet that will keep the bird healthy and fit, while learning how to be transported in a crate allows the bird to be comfortable traveling to programs and vet checkups without stress. This new level of choice given to the Aviary residents has also led to the birds in the Aviary being differentiated into two categories – the “working” birds and the “retired” birds. The retired birds are those that will now enjoy the rest of their time in the Scales & Tales program with no daily routines other than enjoying meals and soaking up the sunshine. On the other hand, the working birds are the individuals who have shown that they are comfortable and confident working with their human partners, and are part of daily training routines and programming. What does an average day of training





routines look like? Lots of trust building, communication and, of course, rewards.

### THE REWARDS BRING TRUST, TRUST BRINGS REWARDS

Every morning, the first items on the to-do list are gathering the weights of the working birds which will help determine their diet for the day, and setting the day's goals. While stepping onto a scale may seem easy to a person, the bird has to build trust in the trainer asking them to perform the task as well as gain the confidence to physically get onto the foreign object in their environment. As a bird makes progress forward in both trust and confidence, they are met with a reward every step of the way. These rewards are made up of different types of food from the specific diet that was written for the bird that morning. While daily goals for birds are likely to include large goals such as comfortability in their crate, each large goal is broken down into many small goals that will work together to make the task achievable. For instance, if a bird's overall goal is to be comfortable being transported in their crate, they have to be comfortable stepping into the crate, the crate door opening and closing, and the crate moving with



**Top:** Seneca, a beautiful hybrid Falcon, interacts with Ranger Mollie Kemp at his environment at the Aviary.

**Inset:** Notice how intently Seneca is responding to his trainer.

PHOTOS BY MIKE CALHOUN

them inside to achieve this goal. New training techniques like this mean that visitors who have been to the Aviary in the past may notice a difference in the type of programming they are seeing during their next visit. While some birds may be participating in the standard programs people are used to, other programs may be providing the visitor a front row seat to experience what a training session looks like.

Whether the avian ambassador is out and about during a program, or within their own enclosure meeting the public, their job as educators remains the same. Through meeting the birds, messages about our environment and the people who protect it are able to gain a face and a personality. One of the most charismatic residents in the Aviary is also one that many first time visitors may not take the time to meet at first glance. Selma, the Black Vulture, has taken on the representative role of misunderstood animals that our ecosystem cannot thrive without. By the end of one meeting with Selma, visitors leave with an understanding of the vital role, as “nature’s cleanup crew,” that vultures play to help rid the spaces we share of diseases such as rabies that impact humans. The change in the world around us, such as shifts in different species’ ranges due to our warming climate, can also be discussed through the black vulture. These birds, once a more southern species, can now be seen frequently in the mountains of Maryland soaring with their larger cousins, the turkey vulture.

## THE POWER OF ONE

Though the staff may guide visitors to birds like vultures to allow their stories to be heard, other birds need no introduction. The Rocky Gap State Park Aviary is also home to two resident mature bald eagles, Mo and Leo. Messages of survival and a comeback set the stage for park rangers to explain the full story of how one of our most recognizable birds almost came to their end in the late 1900s. While the bald eagle’s story may start with the explanation of how man-made problems in the form of the pesticide DDT took this iconic bird to the brink of extinction, park visitors are also met with an inspiring end to the story. Tales of environmental heroes such as the biologist and author Rachel Carson, who worked to shed light on the impact of DDT, provide anecdotes for how one person can change the world and its inhabitants can be impacted for the better. In this new era, DDT may be a thing of the past but other threats face birds of prey, particularly eagles. After tremendous success in combating the consequences of pesticide



**Barred Owl, Rosie, stepping on the scale for her daily weigh-in and reward.**

*PHOTO BY SAM DIXON*

poisoning, lead poisoning from lead bullets used in hunting has revealed its devastating effects on scavengers like eagles and vultures. In addition to these pinpointed impacts, the existential threat of a warming planet reveals a larger, looming consequence for more than just birds. With a dire message tinged with doom and gloom, rangers share the threats facing these animals but are eager to remind visitors of the power of one. Just as Rachel Carson shouted from the rooftops, young people all over the world are working to bring to light the effects climate change has on our planet. The power of one gives way to the power of many.

After an in-depth look at all of the new things happening behind the scenes at the Rocky Gap State Park Aviary, it is easy to see that this is not a task that can be faced alone, much in the same way we need to work to protect our planet. The rangers will tell you that it is truly special to have the whole team on board to support the upkeep of the Aviary and welfare of the resident birds. Just like the birds in the Aviary, the park staff that provide care for their



Scales & Tales ambassadors bring a wide variety of skills and knowledge to the table. From perch making to electrical wiring for heated roost boxes, and bird training to enclosure cleaning, the to-do list of tasks that it takes to run the Aviary are met with a hard-working group of people dedicated to making the program successful. To meet the avian ambassadors in the Rocky Gap State Park Aviary, check them out in person at the park and follow the Friends of Rocky Gap State Park on Facebook for upcoming programs. More information about the amazing work being done through Natural Encounters Inc. and the International Association of Avian Trainers and Educators can be found on their websites at: <https://naturalencounters.com/> and <https://iaate.org/>.

**UPCOMING EVENTS 2022**

*Visit the Friends of Rocky Gap Facebook page or contact the park at 301-722-1480 to learn more.*

**May 28, 2022 – Scales & Tales – 7:30 PM**

Join rangers for a Scales & Tales Campfire Program at the Campground Amphitheater.

**June 11-12, 2022 – Art in the Park Saturday 10 AM – 5 PM, Sunday 10 AM – 4 PM**

Join us for the first annual Art in the Park festival at the Amphitheater in Rocky Gap State Park in Cumberland, Maryland. Along the shore of Lake Habeeb with a backdrop of Evitts Mountain, this event will include local art and food vendors as well as live music and other activities. For festival questions and vendor applications, contact Ranger Sam Dixon at [samantha.dixon@maryland.gov](mailto:samantha.dixon@maryland.gov).

**October 1-2, 2022 – Hawk Watch Weekend! Saturday 10 AM – 1 PM, Sunday 10 AM – 3 PM**

Join rangers for an exciting weekend of hawk watching! Start this journey learning how to identify raptors in flight in a classroom setting on Saturday and then take it to the skies with a field trip to a premier hawk watching location in Allegany County.

**December 17, 2022 – Christmas Bird Count – All Day Activities**

Join rangers for the 123rd Annual National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count. Activities will fill the day for all ages!

**Throughout the Year – Daily Animal Training**

Join rangers to witness the power of partnership through meaningful training with the Scales & Tales Avian Ambassadors. Daily at the Aviary located in the Youth Group Loop of the Campground.



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