

BOOK REVIEW

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Cool North Wind: Morley Nelson's Life with Birds of Prey. By Stephen Stuebner. 2002. Caxton Press, Caldwell, ID. xx + 431 pp., 17 color photographs, numerous black-and-white photographs. ISBN 0-87004-426-5. Cloth, \$24.95.—Admirers of Morley Nelson will enjoy the stories told in this book, as will all other raptor enthusiasts. This account describes the life of a man of action, a man with a fierce passion for birds of prey. It traces his introduction to the family farm in North Dakota, where Morley first became acquainted with wild birds of prey, and his beginnings in falconry with a Red-tailed Hawk (*Buteo jamaicensis*) taken from a nest on the farm. From the first encounter with that hawk, there was no turning back for Morley. His life has revolved around birds of prey for more than seven decades, and the world is a better place for it. This book makes a case for inclusion of Morley Nelson among the world's all-time raptor "protectors," and in the process of ranking Morley Nelson's accomplishments in comparison with other notable conservationists, may actually do Morley a disservice.

Morley was born in 1917 and raised on a farm in North Dakota. Many of the experiences of living on a farm shaped his life, including lessons about killing animals for food, dealing with all sorts of animals, and overcoming hardships with resolve and determination. A defining moment in young Morley's life occurred while he rode his horse "Slim" across a pasture that held a pond. The horse inadvertently caused four Green-winged Teal (*Anas crecca*) to flush from the pond, and Morley was amazed to see a tremendously exciting phenomenon of nature: a Peregrine Falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) diving out of the blue, striking one of the teal with an explosion of energy and feathers, grabbing the teal out of the air, after inverting in flight, and flying off with it.

Later, Morley had opportunity to tell his father and grandfather about what he had seen, and he expressed a fervent desire to obtain a hawk and try to train it. With his father's blessing, Morley went

out and located the nest of a pair of Red-tailed Hawks, and with a fair amount of effort, climbed the tree and pulled an eyas to take home. Morley used his own sensibility and ingenuity, and support from his father and grandfather, to figure out how to "man" the hawk, train it to hunt with him, and to take game on the family farm. Morley became a self-taught falconer and began at age twelve a lifelong pursuit that made him famous, led to his personal connections with governors and people in entertainment and high places, and enabled him to do what he could to educate the public and protect wild raptors and their habitats.

Cool North Wind describes the progress of Morley's life as a student at North Dakota State University, where he obtained a bachelor of science degree and specialized in soil science and hydrology. Morley answered an advertisement for a job with the Soil Erosion Service in New Mexico and moved there, where he was pleased to meet Luna Leopold, then a professor at the University of New Mexico. Contact with the son of famed ecologist Aldo Leopold made a lifelong impression on Morley.

The attack on Pearl Harbor pulled Morley, like many other Americans of his age, into World War II, and he became an officer in the famed Tenth Mountain Division. This elite Army division required very strenuous physical training in mountainous survival-type settings. Morley proved to be a perfect fit for this assignment, and he perfected mountaineering skills that later were very useful in climbing to Prairie Falcon (*Falco mexicanus*) and Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) nests. Morley eventually entered combat with his division and performed superbly, even when wounded in combat. Yet, he maintained a bit of a nonconformist streak, going absent without leave during a period of convalescence from a war wound in order to take a jeep ride to check out raptor nests in Yugoslavia.

Cool North Wind continues as it traces Morley's life after the war, his falling in love with his first wife, Betsy Ann, and the arrival of their three children. Morley resumed what was to become a very successful career with the Soil Conservation Service. But raptors and falconry continued to play a

dominating role in his life. His children grew up with Prairie Falcons and Golden Eagles in the house, as well as Ferruginous Hawks (*Buteo regalis*) and many other raptors. Rehabilitation of injured raptors became a part of the "normal" life in the Nelson household.

Over the years, various unique challenges and opportunities presented themselves, as Morley became regionally and even nationally known for his work with birds of prey and his passion for them. Morley became a consultant in the preparation and filming of a number of feature films, including those made by the Disney Corporation. These films featured birds of prey that were trained by Morley and allowed for hunting and other spectacular aerial scenes that depicted the lives, natural history, and magnificence of various species of raptors. Morley and his sons eventually formed their own production company and have produced their own high-quality films featuring birds of prey. These fabulous film productions have educated the public on natural history of birds of prey, as well as promoting admiration, protection, and conservation of the birds and their habitats.

Morley was able to translate his intimate knowledge and appreciation of the unique Snake River nesting habitat as one of the richest breeding areas for birds of prey in North America into establishment of a National Conservation Area for these birds, which were at risk of losing their critical habitat to the growing agriculture industry. He was also hired by Idaho Power to help redesign power poles and structures to minimize dangers of electrocution to Golden Eagles and other large raptors. Morley used a mock power pole setup at his residence to experiment with his own live eagles and thus learn design techniques that would minimize risk of electrocution.

All the while, Morley used his voice and clout to call for an end to shooting of raptors and for an increase in facilities to care for sick and injured raptors. *Cool North Wind* tells some stories of altercations between Morley and citizens who made the mistake of threatening to shoot wild raptors, in which case harsh words were exchanged and fights were narrowly averted.

This book contains many, many good stories. But it has some flaws. Very little is said about the actual practice of falconry by Morley Nelson. Falconry is the taking of live quarry with trained birds of prey, and very little is said about Morley's hunting with

trained falcons, which detracts from the book's potential appeal to falconers. There are inaccuracies in the book, such as a story of Morley's training in the Aleutian Islands prior to WWII combat, where Morley encountered a Peale's Peregrine Falcon. The Peale's Peregrine is incorrectly described as an "arctic" subspecies of the Peregrine Falcon.

The principal flaw of this biography of such an impressive man is the attempt to rank his accomplishments with those of other raptor "protectionists." By making such an attempt, further scrutiny is invited. For instance, although it is true that Morley Nelson consulted with the power industry in Idaho to develop transmission facilities that would be safer for raptors, what is not emphasized is that by so doing, the power industry has been able to ward off federal regulation that could have imposed more stringent safety standards for raptors.

Even the successful preservation of the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area tells only part of the story. Compromises were made with local land users, including cattlemen and the Idaho National Guard, in order to obtain political consent to preserve the Snake River Birds of Prey Area from agricultural development. As a result, those "conservation" lands have never been managed primarily for the benefit of the resident birds of prey, despite the name of the BLM-managed area. Consequently, a tremendous negative change has occurred in the conservation area over the past few decades, and habitat is now altered considerably. Shrubsteppe habitats are highly degraded, invasive cheatgrass is reducing lagomorph populations, fire regimes have become catastrophic, Golden Eagle and Prairie Falcon numbers are in long-term decline, and no one has found a solution for protecting the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area from its own management. Morley Nelson is now well aware of the declines of eagles and falcons, and he surely appreciates that saving the lands from cultivation was not the permanent solution he might have hoped for.

As a biography of a fascinating life, this book deserves reading by all raptor enthusiasts. It provides a history of a man who truly is an American original. Morley Nelson has won respect from essentially everyone he has encountered during his long life, and his fierce passion for birds of prey has been contagious and inspiring to countless admirers from all walks of life.—**Stan Moore, 4220 Langner Avenue, Santa Rosa, CA 95407 U.S.A.**