

Gryphon: A Wise Owl After All

by Teri Grendzinski, Trainer

In June of 1996 a Snowy Owl was hatched at the National Aviary. We named her Gryphon, and I had the honor of hand raising her. Our goal was to use her for education programs, which she did for years, either sitting on a perch or on the gloved hand of a trainer. She helped hundreds of school children learn about raptors such as owls.

One thing the children were taught is that mostly the “wise old owl” is just a myth. As far as birds go, owls aren’t usually considered very intelligent or trainable.

As Gryphon got older, however, she started trying to jump off the glove whenever we had to move. We decided to use positive reinforcement training to make the glove a place she wanted to be. We’d give her a bit of food she liked when she was on the glove, and when she decided to jump off we would simply leave and come back later. She didn’t have to stay on the glove, but she was learning that she got lots of food being there! But when we started trying to walk with her on the glove, she would still leave and go back to her perch.

Since this training was going so slowly, we decided to try something different. We knew owls have a

reputation for being difficult to train, but we really wanted to get her back out for Aviary programs. We started by training Gryphon to enter her crate from her house, without picking her up. Amazingly, she learned this in less than three weeks, when we had spent almost a year working on her staying on the glove while we walked fewer than 20 feet.

Once Gryphon was entering her crate on cue, we took her to our classroom to

feet back and forth between two tables. We were beginning to think she was a wise old owl after all!

Now for the fun part... We took her into the atrium and had her fly to the stage. In three training sessions she was flying from a table by the classroom wall all the way to the stage and back—over the heads of visitors!

Gryphon is now consistently flying in the atrium and in our classrooms.

She has even gone on her first outreach to a school and performed perfectly. Gryphon can occasionally be seen in the Raptor Encounter at 10:30 a.m. in our atrium, but she is usually busy helping us teach classes to the many school groups that come to the Aviary at this time of year. She will have the summer off—Snowy Owls don’t like to work in



Gryphon comes in for a landing in the National Aviary atrium.

National Aviary Photo by Christa Wright

begin flight training. We took it in baby steps since she had never flown very far before. At the first session, she came out of her crate to a mat right in front so she could look around, and then she went back into the crate. The next session, she came out about four feet. We then had her fly a short distance to a table. Within two weeks she was flying about twenty

the heat of Pittsburgh summers—and be back to flying in the atrium and classrooms in the fall.

Teri Grendzinski has been a trainer at the National Aviary since 1993. She is the Aviary’s White Dove specialist and also works with parrots, birds of prey, penguins and others.

Breakfast with the Birds!

Saturday mornings 8:30 - 10AM

June 2, August 4, October 6 & December 1

Spend an early morning with over 500 exotic and endangered birds! During a light continental breakfast, you’ll enjoy up-close encounters with several different birds. Learn fascinating facts, ask questions and take photos. Following breakfast, embark on a personal tour with Aviary staff, where you can feed breakfast to the birds. Fun for all ages! Reservations required. Call 412-323-7235 ext. 249 for more details. \$18 adults; \$15 children; member discounts available.

