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Subject: FW: Colorado Springs meets the falcons

From: Gutierrez, Barbara L CIV USAF USAFA USAFA/CMA

Sent: Wednesday, September 28, 2011 1:00 PM

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See news release below.

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BARBARA GUTIERREZ

Parents' Liaison

U.S. Air Force Academy, CO

(719) 333-3828 Toll free (877) 268-3383

News Release #145
Sept. 28, 2011

Colorado Springs meets the falcons

By Don Branum
Air Force Academy Public Affairs

U.S. AIR FORCE ACADEMY, Colo. -- Have falcon, will travel.

Two cadets hit the road Sept. 21 to meet with attendees at an Aiken Audubon Society meeting in Colorado Springs and talk about the Air Force Academy's falconry program. Along with them was Destiny, a gray gyrfalcon.

Cadet falconers conduct roughly 200 presentations per year, with most of those taking place in the Pikes Peak region. They regularly travel to away football games and other events, sometimes by commercial air and sometimes on a military cargo aircraft, said Cadet 2nd Class Cameron Harris, who conducted the presentation along with Cadet 3rd Class Trent Grabowski.

While commercial air is generally more comfortable, "mil air" is not without its benefits, said Harris, a San Antonio native.

"When we travel mil air, we get to fly on the same plane as the cheerleading team," he added.

Destiny, at 18, is one of the Academy's oldest current falcons, Grabowski said. The oldest living falcon among the baker's dozen of birds at the Academy is Cody, who is 19.

"He's actually older than I am," Grabowski said, smiling while the crowd laughed. "Our officer in charge is a lieutenant colonel now; when he was a cadet, Cody was his main bird."

It's unusual for gyrfalcons to live beyond about 12 years in the wild, said Grabowski, a native of Orange County, Calif. The Academy's birds live longer because they are safe from predators and less likely to die from disease.

When the West Nile virus did strike the mews in 2003, only one of the birds, Magellan, died, according to a report in the Gazette. The other birds survived, but Destiny carried a lasting ailment: blindness in her left eye, Grabowski said.

Risë Foster-Bruder, the Aiken Audubon Society president, remembers the West Nile virus outbreak, which happened shortly after her family moved to Colorado Springs. She said she has interacted with the cadet falconers frequently in the last nine years.

"I'd see the falconers at the Bear Creek Nature Center, Parents' Weekend parades and football games, and I'd always try to talk to them," said Foster-Bruder, whose elder son graduated from the Academy in 2010 and whose younger son is set to graduate in May.

From that interaction stemmed a desire to expose the falconry program to more local bird watchers. Foster-Bruder contacted Sam Dollar, the adviser for the Academy's falconry program, to schedule the presentation.

"A lot of people don't get a chance to see a falcon up close and personal and chat with a couple of the cadets," she said.

Grabowski and Harris seemed to enjoy the chance to talk with a rapt audience. They took turns answering questions.

A younger audience member, 9-year-old Elli Bohanan, asked, "Where are their ears?" Grabowski explained that unlike humans' "floppy ears" -- a term that earned some laughs from the bird watchers -- falcons' ears are just holes on the sides of their heads, covered by feathers.

Harris described the procedures for feeding and training the birds and told the audience about Ace, a black gyrfalcon-saker hybrid who decided to hang out in downtown Shreveport, La., rather than perform for the 2010 Independence Bowl.

"There was a lot of luck involved" in Ace's rescue, Harris said. The initial response team spent hours searching for the bird, fearing that owls -- falcons' natural predators -- would find Ace once night fell. After hours of searching, they traced his signal to the top of a building next to a parking deck.

"We used the lure just like we do for demonstrations, and he responded," Harris said.

Grabowski and Harris also shared gossip on the Academy's official mascot, Aurora, to the group's delight. Aurora, a rare white gyrfalcon, acts like an angel in public but shows her horns when it's just her and the cadets.

"Most of our birds, when they bite, it's like a warning, but our mascot, when she tries to bite you, it's like she's trying to maul your hand," Grabowski said. "She's an angry bird."

Aurora bred true in 2010, hatching a daughter, whom the falconers named Athena. The younger white gyrfalcon has started adopting some of her mother's bad habits, Grabowski said. Still, he added, the cadets know they're lucky to have even one white gyrfalcon: gyrs are the rarest of five North American falcon species, and white gyrs make up 1 percent of that number.

As far as the falcons and their handlers have traveled, word of the program has traveled even farther. Falconers at the Abu Dhabi International Hunting and Equestrian Exhibition in the United Arab Emirates had heard of Aurora when cadets traveled to ADIHEX in September 2010.

"They offered us \$250,000 for her," he said.

NOTE: The following cut lines with accompanying links to photos can be used with the above article:

Cindy Bohanan and her 9-year-old daughter, Elli, meet Destiny, one of the Air Force Academy's 13 falcons, during an Aiken Audubon Society meeting in Colorado Springs, Colo., Sept. 21, 2011. Cadet 3rd Class Trent Grabowski of Cadet Squadron 07 (right) and Cadet 2nd Class Cameron Harris of Cadet Squadron 20 (not pictured) gave a 45-minute presentation on the Academy's falconry program. (U.S. Air Force photo/Don Branum) <http://www.usafa.af.mil/shared/media/photodb/photos/110921-F-YY717-025.jpg>

Cadet 3rd Class Trent Grabowski talks about the Air Force Academy's falconry program at a meeting of the Aiken Audubon Society in Colorado Springs, Colo., Sept. 21, 2011. Grabowski and Cadet 2nd Class Cameron Harris, not pictured, provided the 45-minute presentation discussing the birds' care, feeding and training. With Grabowski is Destiny, a gray faced gyrfalcon and one of the Academy's 13 birds of prey. (U.S. Air Force photo/Don Branum) <http://www.usafa.af.mil/shared/media/photodb/photos/110921-F-YY717-034.jpg>