

Obituary

Jerry (Gerald Richard) Olsen

1948–2021



Jerry Olsen releasing an adult male Swamp Harrier that is wearing a satellite transmitter. Photo: Susan Trost (courtesy of Michael Lenz)

Jerry Olsen, prominent raptor and owl researcher, conservationist, rehabilitator and defender, died suddenly in tragic and unforeseen circumstances on 31 January 2021. Jerry was an expat American who migrated to South Australia (Port Augusta) in the 1970s to be a primary-school teacher and tutor of disadvantaged children. In his youth in the United States of America he was a keen falconer (where the practice was and is legal), and he transferred those skills to rescue injured and captive ('pet') raptors and train them for release. While in South Australia, still in the DDT era, he formed a raptor-monitoring program to investigate the raptors nesting in the cliffs and valleys of the Flinders Ranges and this activity spread, through colleagues, to other parts such as Kangaroo Island.

Jerry had gained a Bachelor of Arts in Washington State (USA), and he moved from Port Augusta to Canberra in 1975 to finish a Bachelor of Science in zoology at the Australian National University while he taught at schools. He then gained a Master of Education and lectured in education at what became the University of Canberra. He also undertook a Masters degree on Peregrine Falcons through the University of New England under our mutual supervisor Professor Peter Jarman. We first met when Jerry came to Armidale to see Peter, and Jerry's raptor knowledge and enthusiasm were infectious and inspiring. After retirement, Jerry continued as an adjunct (an honorary position) in the Institute for Applied Ecology at the University of Canberra, and with his raptor research and writing.

Among Jerry's early exploits were his trained raptors featuring in films, including by the Leyland Brothers for the Roger Whittaker series 'Hunters of the Skies' showing a rehabilitated Little Eagle and Black Falcon hunting, and various movies with famous actors featuring a trained Wedge-tailed Eagle and Peregrine Falcon. Jerry was also

involved, with Peter Slater, in falconry trials at Sydney Airport, to try to mitigate aircraft bird-strike by scaring gulls off the runways.

Much of the background to Jerry's early years and his time in Australia can be found in his books on his 'raptor life' (1994), owls (2011) and diurnal raptors (2014), all of which are highly recommended as engaging reads for the layperson. He wrote a raptor rehabilitation manual (1990) and tens of papers on the ecology of most of the raptors and owls of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) and elsewhere, in peer-reviewed journals (including *Emu*, *Wildlife Research*, *Journal of Raptor Research*, *Corella*, *Australian Field Ornithology* and *Canberra Bird Notes*) and many items in *Boobook*, which is the newsletter of the BirdLife Australia Raptor Group (BARG).

We had been collaborating, along with his partner and colleagues, on raptor and owl papers for many years, on data and dietary samples that he and others had collected in the field, and he had enlisted help to write it all up. And there are more of his papers in preparation, to be finished by colleagues. Jerry contributed enormously to understanding of Australian raptors and owls, and to some on islands in the region (Solomon Islands, Lesser Sundas), including discovery of a new *Ninox* owl species on Sumba. He was a mentor and supervisor of students, a collaborator on raptor projects, and a passionate advocate of raptor science and conservation. He had a healthy scepticism for some of the old dogma or folklore on Australian raptors, busted a few myths on them, and was keen on robust but friendly scientific debate, which he found wanting in Australian raptor biology.

Jerry described himself as a 'Peregrine person', something he felt others didn't realise, although much of his research attention in recent times was focused on some lesser-known species as well (e.g. Black-shouldered Kite, Whistling Kite, White-bellied Sea-Eagle, Collared Sparrowhawk, Nankeen Kestrel, Australian Hobby, Southern Boobook, as well as species on Sumba). Jerry was the ACT Representative for what is now BARG since 1985. His enormous contribution to knowledge of Australian raptors and owls (far too many papers to list here) is available on ResearchGate, and many are cited in his books (2011 and 2014).

I thank Penny Olsen and Terry Dennis for providing much of the early background on Jerry, further details of which can be found in tributes in *Boobook* (forthcoming) and in *Canberra Bird Notes* (Debus 2021). Jerry is survived by his partner Sue Trost, his two children and four grandchildren.

References

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