

# Raptor education takes flight

- HawkQuest coming to Ridgway State Park
- Nonprofit dedicated to birds of prey
- Early love of falconry drew expert to the field

By KATHARHYNH HEIDELBERG  
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A movie instilled in a 9-year-old Kin Quitugua the interest in hawks that led him to become a master falconer.

Although hawks and other raptors grace Western Colorado skies, that wasn't the case in Guam, the U.S. territory where Quitugua grew up.

"In Guam, we don't have any hawks," he said.

But that movie those year ago fueled his love for birds of prey, led to him becoming a master falconer, founding the Parker-based nonprofit HawkQuest, and now, is leading him to Ridgway State Park's visitors center, where he will host a presentation at 7 tonight.

He's bringing some feathered friends with him — a bald eagle, a great horned owl and Harris' hawk, plus either a peregrine falcon or Aplomado falcon.

The presentation is an opportunity to see up close what one might otherwise only see in passing.

"Oftentimes, when you see a hawk in the wild, she's going the other way. If you do see a bald eagle, say, in a zoo, they're usually behind bars," Quitugua said, though he acknowledged people in Western Colorado are fortunate to be able to catch a glimpse of the national emblem in the wild.

"What we bring is the ability to see a bird up close. We're going to fly a hawk so you get to see what it does in the wild — and to see four species in one place, I think it's pretty cool," he said.

Quitugua at first gave informal lectures.

"I had a teacher friend who asked me to do a lecture at her school. I had a red tail hawk then. I figured the kids would be bored, but I was there for the whole hour," he said.

The word spread and so did his lecture circuit.

Quitugua incorporated HawkQuest in 1986. It has since become the largest group devoted to raptors in a five-state area, in terms of the numbers of people seen on an outreach basis. HawkQuest saw



Master falconer Kin Quitugua holds a bald eagle. Quitugua, of the nonprofit HawkQuest, is coming to Ridgway State Park tonight with some of his raptors for an educational demonstration. (Submitted photo/ HawkQuest)

close to a million people last year and was part of 640 events.

It's also home to 39 birds, including eagles, hawks, falcons and even one vulture.

"I love raptors," Quitugua said. "I devote my life to them and need about three more lifetimes to figure it out."

Raptors sit near the top of the food chain, he said, and through them, humankind can see the effects of its own behavior.

"They're a barometer of what we're doing to the environment," Quitugua said. "We almost lost the bald eagle and the peregrine falcon through (the pesticide) DDT. We're the biggest producers of DDT and we sent that to the Third World."

Lead contamination from bullets fired into the carcasses a raptor might eat passes through to the bird. Prior to lead being removed from paint and gasoline, those substances, too, could affect raptors.

"They do take everything in. Everything rolls up to them. The biggest thing the birds tell us is what we're doing to the environment," Quitugua said.

Ridgway State Park staff began working last summer on bringing HawkQuest to the area.

"It's just to educate people about different birds of prey and their part in the different ecosystems we have around here; just to give people the opportunity to get up close

and be able to visit with somebody who's worked with them for over 30 years," said Carrie Krickbaum, a naturalist and educator at the park.

"There's a lot of work and a lot of science that goes into understanding them and their part in the food chain. They're just cool to look at, too."

She worked with Chelsea McCoach, ranger, and regional staff to bring HawkQuest to Ridgway State Park.



A great horned owl is expected as a guest at HawkQuest's presentation tonight at Ridgway State Park. (Submitted photo/ HawkQuest)

The hope is attendees will enjoy the experience of being close to majestic birds, plus learn why people and organizations like HawkQuest invest in recovery efforts, Krickbaum said.

"I encourage people to come and enjoy the presentation and the beauty of the park," she said.

Ridgway State Park is approximately 20 miles south of Montrose on U.S. 550. To reach the visitor's center, use the Dutch Charlie entrance. Park entry fees apply, though the presentation is free.

*Katharhynch Heidelberg is an award-winning journalist and the senior writer for the Montrose Daily Press. Follow her on Twitter at @kathMDP.*



HawkQuest intends to bring a peregrine falcon like this bird to its presentation tonight at Ridgway State Park. (Submitted photo/ HawkQuest)



A Harris' hawk floats with its talons extended. (Submitted photo/ HawkQuest)

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