

Green

The Raptor Trust: From Backyard Pioneer to World-Class Bird Rehabilitation



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Published July 22, 2025 at 9:00 AM

MILLINGTON, NJ - In the heart of the Great Swamp, near the intersection of White Bridge and Pleasant Plains Road, a collection of modest buildings stands nestled between the trees. This is The Raptor Trust, a premier wild bird rehabilitation center that has been treating and housing birds as well as educating the public for over forty years.

What began as one man's passion has evolved over the years into a multifaceted organization that aims to provide the best care and advocacy for birds of all kinds.

The roots of The Raptor Trust date back to the 1960s when Len Soucy began developing an interest in bird and wildlife conservation.

"There was no such thing as wildlife rehabilitation. No permits were required, and there was no real network of people doing that kind of work, trying to get wild animals back into the wild. So he wanted to change that," said Chris Soucy, Len's son and the current Executive Director of The Raptor Trust.

"Over the course of several years, he sort of got a reputation in our community as, you know, that guy in the swamp who knew a lot about birds. Then, people started calling, saying they had injured ones, and he never said 'no.' He said, 'Bring it over.' And he had a friend who was a vet and a bird watcher, and together they figured out how to treat these birds at a time when there weren't really any resources for it," Chris continued.

The 14 acres of land that served as the headquarters for this emerging operation, and where the current Raptor Trust stands, was the Soucy family's backyard. Chris, who grew up in this unorthodox environment, watched firsthand as his father and his friend navigated the primitive landscape of bird rehabilitation.

“There were no protocols for anesthesia, no orthopedic surgery practice for birds that have hollow bones and a very different physiology than dogs or pets that might be treated at a vet clinic. So they were kind of pioneers in a way,” Chris said.

What began as a quaint backyard outfit soon grew into a bustling institution that Len ultimately passed down to Chris, and it now rarely sees a dull moment.

Since its official inception as a nonprofit organization in 1982, the clinic has admitted nearly 150,000 birds, of which about 10% have been raptors, a subgroup of birds that have been historically persecuted around the world. In 2024 alone, the trust admitted and gave care to 531 raptors, most of them hawks and owls.

The organization's primary objective has always been to treat and release admitted birds back into the wild. While it is unfortunately not always the case, in 2024 alone, they were able to release a remarkable 2,276 birds into their natural habitats. Particularly in the release process, being located in the Great Swamp has proven to be an immense upside for the Trust.

“We're less than 30 miles from Manhattan, in an 8,000-acre wildlife refuge and protected federal wetlands. It's great for us because we release a lot of native birds just in our area, and they're not in a densely packed, dangerous urban setting. They're in an 8000-acre protected wildlife refuge. We release a lot of them right nearby, and it's a great habitat for them,” Chris Soucy said.

While the Great Swamp's avian sanctuary has long been defined by consistent care and an unwavering dedication, evolving concerns continue to pose new threats to birds.

“In the past few years, there's been this infestation of spotted lantern flies, and a lot of people have been using glue traps to try to catch them. People are wrapping a band of glue around trees, because [spotted lanternflies] climb up trees and lay their eggs in the bark. And we've seen a lot of birds caught in the glue traps,” Chris said.

The spotted lanternfly, initially detected in Pennsylvania in 2014, has quickly spread to the surrounding states, becoming a major agricultural issue in New Jersey. While State and local environmental organizations encourage and rely on the public to help manage the invasive species, the director of the Trust asserts that glue traps are far from the best course of action.

“The bugs get caught in them, and they look like an easy target for birds. So not only does the glue trap catch birds sometimes, but it can also catch anything else that might be walking up or flying by that tree, like a small bat or a little chipmunk. And in a lot of cases, the things that might actually be predators for the spotted lantern fly are being caught in these glue traps,” Chris explained.

In addition to managing new threats, the persistent need to fund care for the birds is a never-ending pursuit for the organization. To reliably provide world-class medical attention, The Raptor Trust incurs 1.6 million dollars per year in general operating costs. Receiving no local, state, or federal funding, financial support is provided almost entirely through individual donations and investments.

These donations are the lifeline to achieving The Raptor Trust’s mission: “to provide free care and assistance to injured, sick, or orphaned native wild birds; educate people about wild birds, especially birds of prey; and provide a humane example for others.” (The Raptor Trust, 2024 Annual Report).

To explore ways to support the Raptor Trust, visit the following link: <https://www.theraptortrust.org/support>