

Encouraging Kids to Look Closely

By Mary Tillotson

Phil Huxford and Steve Hoddy, born within months of each other more than 50 years ago, grew up a continent apart. But as boys they shared a passion for the outdoors.

Huxford says whenever he came home in New Jersey with his hands cupped, his mother ran for a paper bag to trap his “catch.” She knew from experience he was holding a frog or some other wild critter.

Hoddy spent most of his boyhood in Southern California, but was visiting Louisiana when his grandfather introduced him to bird watching when he was nine.

Huxford grew up to work in construction and landscaping in Texas. Hoddy became an animal trainer, master falconer and founder of a nonprofit environmental education organization, Earthquest, based in Georgia.

Now they’ve joined forces to share their love of nature with Houston-area residents, especially children.

Huxford is a moving force in the nonprofit, volunteer Friends of Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge, on the Texas Gulf Coast about 60 miles from Houston, is a winter home to sandhill cranes, snow geese and other species. Herons, egrets, white ibis and roseate spoonbills summer there. In spring, migrating songbirds stop at Brazoria Refuge on their way north from Yucatan.

Fifteen years ago, Huxford helped organize the refuge’s Spring Migration Festival. Refuge staff and Friends recruited Steve Hoddy to bring his birds-of-prey program to the festival – a reminder to Houstonians of the natural world at the backdoor of their traffic-clogged metropolis.

Meeting the Kids

But seven years ago, Huxford and Bryan Adams, an education specialist with the Texas Mid-Coast National Wildlife Refuge Complex that encompasses Brazoria Refuge, decided to reach an even wider audience – Houston-area school kids.

That first year, Huxford and falconer Hoddy brought the birds-of-prey show to some 2,200 children and teachers in five schools. By 2009, Huxford and Hoddy offered their half-hour presentation in 18 schools, to more than 9,000 students and teachers from grades pre-K through middle school.

“It’s not just a warm, fuzzy program about birds,” says Huxford. “It’s about awareness. Trying to get the kids – and the teachers, too – to take time and look around at them at their world. To look *closely!*”

Each Hoddy presentation costs the Friends of Brazoria \$400 – Hoddy’s fee plus transportation and lodging. He usually visits Texas in March or early April, promoting the refuge’s Spring Migration Festival at each school, in hopes that youngsters who’ve seen him will enlist their parents to see the birds, too, at the refuge.

ConocoPhillips, a Houston-based oil company, has vast holdings in Brazoria County, both on- and off-shore along the Gulf and has become a reliable and generous corporate sponsor. Supporting an environmental education program is good community relations for an oil company, says Huxford, who was

acquainted with some of the company’s executives through his civic work. ConocoPhillips had been contributing to Brazoria Refuge’s annual Spring Migration Festival for 15 years, so Huxford thought the company might also underwrite a program that benefits the children of Brazoria County, including the kids of ConocoPhillips employees. He was right.

In 2009, the company donated more than \$6,000 for 20 birds-of-prey school programs, more than twice as many as the company underwrote the year before. ConocoPhillips donates another \$2,000 to Brazoria Refuge’s annual festival.

Hoddy generally uses five birds in his presentation: a hybrid peregrine falcon, an Andean condor, a great-horned owl, a Harris hawk and a black vulture named Igor. Hoddy’s half-hour presentation (outdoors if the weather is fine; in a gym or school auditorium if it’s not) begins with an overview of the birds’ habitats, diets and life cycle.

Unhooded and Untethered

Then comes the kids’ favorite part. Hoddy allows his trained birds, unhooded and untethered, to fly free. The birds soar over the heads of the children – doing what they would do in the wild, if the youngsters were lucky enough to see them there.

Huxford and Hoddy do not expect an immediate return for spending time and energy introducing city kids to the natural world. “It’s for the future,” says Huxford. “We’re so urbanized now, people don’t connect as much with nature. We want them to take time and look around. Want them to be aware that what we do changes the environment. The influence we have can be so subtle. But it’s a start.” 🦅

Mary Tillotson is a career journalist who formerly worked for the Refuge System Branch of Communications.



Programs featuring birds-of-prey like the peregrine falcon help make students in Houston, TX, more aware of the natural world. (Craig Koppie)