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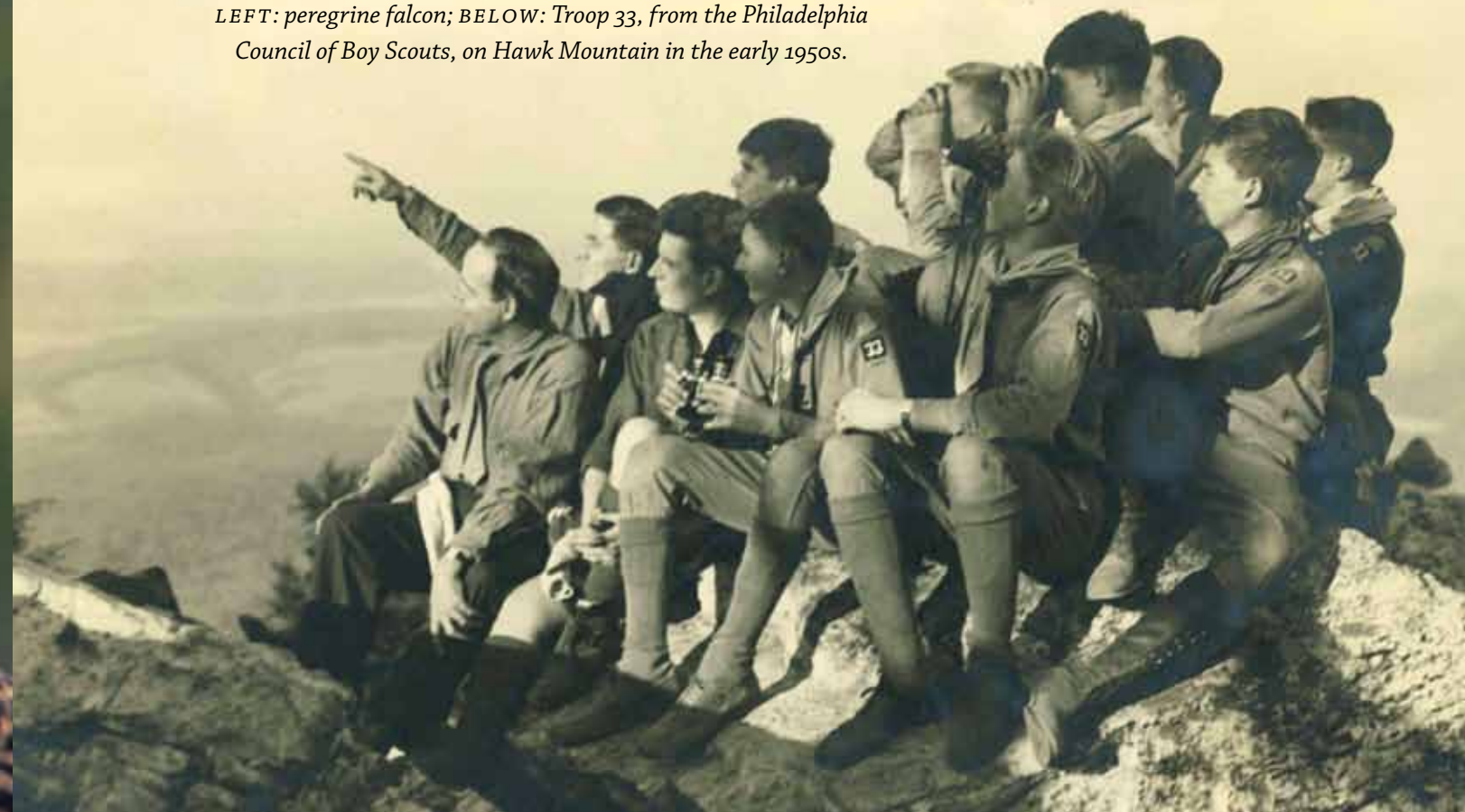
Freedom to Soar

BY DARRIN YOUKER

At the turn of the 20th century, the sport of choice among hunters in this corner of Pennsylvania was killing raptors. During fall migrations in the 1920s, hunters would come to the heights along the Kittatinny Ridge to shoot at the eagles and vultures making their annual pass over these mountains. One popular destination, aptly named Hawk Mountain near the village of Eckville, drew hundreds of hunters each year.

But 75 years ago, conservationists took control of the land atop the ridge and staunchly opposed hunting birds of prey. Their vision for conservation evolved into the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, the oldest association dedicated to raptor protection. Since then, the sanctuary's focus has grown internationally, working to preserve habitat for birds across the globe. Yet close to home, along the wooded Kittatinny Ridge, sanctuary staff is continuing their work to protect this forested mountain.

LEFT: peregrine falcon; BELOW: Troop 33, from the Philadelphia Council of Boy Scouts, on Hawk Mountain in the early 1950s.





A famous photo of dead hawks collected from one day of shooting, used to rally support to protect the raptors, inspired the sanctuary's founder Rosalie Edge to take action in 1934.

Thousands of Appalachian Trail hikers pass within walking distance of the sanctuary, located near the Eckville Shelter in Berks County. It is one of many organizations trying to protect this wild and wooded stretch of Pennsylvania. "The Appalachian Trail throughout this section is beautiful," said Lee Schisler Jr., president of the sanctuary. "We work with a lot of groups to protect the viewshed in this valley. We are all interconnected here."

In 1934, conservationist Rosalie Edge leased a large tract of land on Hawk Mountain. Two of its open ridges—north and south lookouts—were popular places for hunters to shoot raptors during fall migrations. She hired Maurice Broun as a warden for the 1,400 acre property. Broun took on the daunting task of educating local sportsman about the need to protect these birds. Their work was extraordinary, Schisler said. "Shooting birds of prey at the lookout was something that was ingrained in the culture here. They were at the top of the mountain, trying to spread the word," he said.

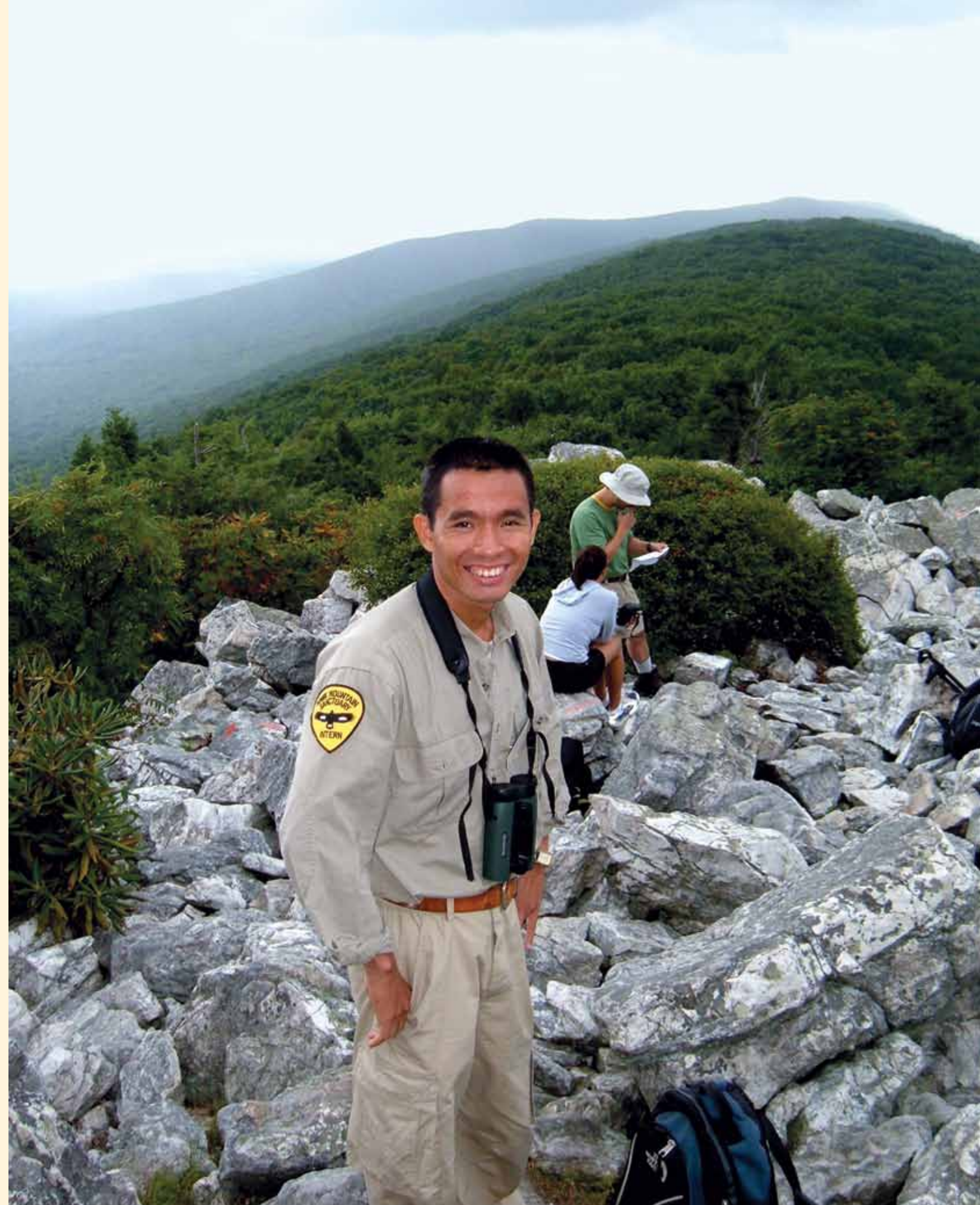
The next year, the Hawk Mountain Sanctuary opened to visitors. Over the years, Broun made counts of the raptors and other birds during migration. That work continues today. The wealth of data collected by researchers has



ABOVE: Hawk Mountain senior research biologist, Chris Farmer, logs data on an open-ridge lookout area;
RIGHT: Hung Manh Le, an intern from Hanoi, Vietnam, getting ready to help with the count.

allowed scientists to uncover trends in bird populations, Schisler said. Famed conservationist Rachel Carson visited Hawk Mountain to examine data about bald eagle populations, using some of her observations in her seminal work *Silent Spring*. "We have the largest running data stream of birds of prey," Schisler said. "They were able to change the whole focus of the mountain. The origins are impressive here."

Bildstein explained that over time, the sanctuary has taken on an international focus, sharing data with scientists and organizations across the globe. Researchers at Hawk Mountain have contributed their expertise and data to help with global problems of bird decline. There are 35 species of birds of prey in North America, representing just 11 percent of all raptors. For Hawk Mountain to advance its mission of raptor protection, it needs to partner with organizations around the world. One way Hawk Mountain has gained partnerships is through its international internship program, Bildstein said. Each year, budding scientists from all over the world come to Hawk Mountain to learn about migrations and participate in bird counts. "We have trained over 300 young scientists from 58 different countries," he said. "That has been an enormous success."



Most of the birds that fly over the rocky ledges of Hawk Mountain appear in the skies over Pennsylvania for a brief time. For birds of prey, this area is a brief stopover on their migration.

Take, for instance, the peregrine falcon. These magnificent birds fly over the sanctuary grounds in September. A month later they will appear in Florida en route to their winter grounds in South America. In the spring, they fly over Pennsylvania while returning to their summer home in Canada, said Dr. Keith Bildstein, sarkis acopian director of conservation science at Hawk Mountain Sanctuary. "We are protecting these birds when they fly over, but they only spend a short time here," Bildstein said. "They are moving targets for conservationists. We have to work together if we are going to protect them."

Currently, researchers at Hawk Mountain are working on two long-term studies of turkey vulture and American kestrel populations. Turkey vultures are a common sight to hikers along the Appalachian Trail, but their worldwide population is on the decline, Bildstein said. Those declines are particularly widespread in Asia. Because they feast on carrion, vultures can be exposed to a wide range of pollutants. That is particularly true in agriculture areas, where vultures can ingest the drugs and pesticides used in farming operations. "We are trying to stay ahead of the curve with these vultures and understand their seasonal migration and observe their environmental condition,"

he said. "Also, the sanctuary has built boxes across its grounds to encourage nesting of American kestrels, which are facing a long-term decline. The West Nile virus has played a role in thinning out their ranks but it does not fully explain the bird's decline."

Visitors to the sanctuary's grounds are likely to see much of the ongoing work of the staff to protect and document birds of prey. A number of hiking trails encircle the property, and a visitor's center offers year round educational programs. On the open lookouts along the mountain, a common summer sight is the turkey vultures and black vultures circling the area. Other raptors who call the Pennsylvania mountains home include the great horned owl, broad-wing hawk, red-tailed hawk, and Cooper's hawk. But in the fall, when migration is at its height, the rocky outlooks on Hawk Mountain are teeming with visitors and bird counters. "Many hikers from the Appalachian Trail make a side trek to visit the sanctuary during these busy fall months," Schisler said. From these lookouts, visitors are treated to the splendor of watching red-tailed hawks, American kestrels, and peregrine falcons in flight.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF THE HAWK MOUNTAIN SANCTUARY

For more information visit:

www.hawkmountain.org

RED-TAILED HAWK BY JEFF SCHMOYER, AMERICAN KESTRAL AND GREAT HORNED OWL COURTESY USFWS.



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