

Some measure accomplishments by monetary value, by how big their house is, what car they drive, how diverse their stock portfolio is. Berni's accomplishments will never be measured by monetary value or through the eyes of a trust fund. The gift she left behind can't be spent, just regifted. Her accomplishments are shown through the care and compassion she showed all walks of life and her driven need to encourage and educate. Her character proven by the hundreds of people who feel the painful hole left behind in her passing. She was a mentor who encouraged action and growth even through trial and tribulation. She was an educator who longed to whet the imagination of children and adults alike. She was an advocate for those without a voice. She held high standards to the care and compassion of life and had no boundaries when protecting what was right.

Bernadette Richter

1953–2022

Berni's loss is felt nationwide from a collection of other beautifully strange and passionate people. Those who were influenced by her and learned through her will continue to speak her words and share her knowledge, keeping her memory alive for decades to come. A child who peered up in awe at the Red-tailed Hawk on her fist during an educational presentation will hold that image for a lifetime and someday perhaps share a tidbit of bird of prey trivia she bestowed on him. She was sent to her eternal soar, riding the thermals of grace too soon, but her accomplishments live on.

Berni's path was set from a young age as an animal lover always with dirt under her nails and mussed windblown hair that glimmered with streaks of bleached sun. Horses were her first love, but her passion for birds of prey was gifted to her later in life when she met her soul mate George Richter, a master falconer. Their introduction was one that could have only been aligned by a higher power, and of course involved a hawk. As the story goes, one thing led to another, and the rest is history. She began her falconry journey by joining George in going to local club events, hawking extravaganzas, and assisted with George's Peregrine breeding project. She became smitten with the idea of preserving the birds and the sport of falconry. In 1985 she turned her efforts to the then-endangered status of the Peregrine falcon and assisted the Chicago Peregrine Release Project in increasing the numbers of breeding pairs through banding, researching, educating the legislatures, and spearheading the campaign to ban Fenthion. It took 10 years but the efforts of Berni and so many others proved victorious, and the poison was banned nationally.



In 1986 Berni became an active member and leader in the Great Lakes Falconers Association. She held many titles through her 10-year tenure. In her service she held Secretary, Director, Legislative Committee Secretary, Education Chair, Newsletter Editor (The Gauntlet, 62 issues), Conservation Chair, and Events Chair. Beyond her dedication to the club, Berni was a known advocate for women in hunting sports and managed to sponsor 14 women in falconry as well as hold the first of its kind annual "Lady Hawkers" events that lasted for over 20 years.

Berni spent countless hours reading, researching (pre-internet) and interviewing many falconers in search of knowledge. In 1989, she developed and hosted beginner falconry classes for the club to entice new members, encourage high standards of care and maintain falconry ethics among the sport. Beyond the seminars, Berni obtained her rehabilitation license specializing in birds of prey and named her project S.O.A.R. (Save Our American Raptors). S.O.A.R. continued the seminars and bird of prey rehab for over 35 years reaching thousands of educators, rehabbers, falconers, and general bird enthusiasts as well as saving hundreds of injured birds.

When she wasn't in the field flying her beloved Red-tailed Hawks, she focused on conservation efforts that protected the air and lands that belonged to the birds. She was instrumental in saving Starved Rock's Plum Island in Illinois from development, leaving it dedicated to wildlife in the protective ownership of The Audubon Society. Berni also spearheaded the preservation of the Dragon Lake Prairie Preserve in Naperville, IL and established the DuPage County Forest Preserve Citizens Advisory Board. Her many rehab patients would often identify unknown hazards to our feathered friends. One singed Red-tailed Hawk patient led to the discovery of the dangers of landfill methane torches. Naturally Berni jumped on board, educating landfills on the dangers of the torches to perching birds. Her efforts were a catalyst to change through state agency hearings, and for her dedication she received the USFWS service award. From dirt to air she sought to invoke a healthy form of consumer progress.

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Berni also co-founded the Wild Raptor Take Conservancy (WRTC), now known as the American Falconry Conservancy (AFC). For 3 years she acted as secretary and even designed the logo for the organization. She didn't just think about birds of prey in her conservation efforts. In 2016 progress struck close to home when the GLB Railroad proposed a freight train line threatening the S.O.A.R. rehabilitation center. She and other threatened landowners organized an opposition and successfully blocked the construction.

All these noted achievements (and more) led to her final legacy. Through all the years of advocating for, rehabbing, and training birds of prey, Berni gained enough knowledge to complete her book. "A Team for the Field" was originally composed in 1991 but went through several revisions to add more information. She jam-packed 146 pages with traditional falconry techniques, medical, husbandry, equipment, and so much more. It's a simple read with easy-to-follow diagrams, dynamic color photos, and hand-drawn art. The final draft was completed only months before her passing, and when she saw it in print, with emotional eyes, she shared with family that she had achieved her goal. She was going to leave a legacy.

For those who knew her a short time or knew her well, you cannot deny the passion Berni had for all things living. Her achievements are only a shadow of what she wanted to accomplish but her legacy will continue to educate and inspire falconers and bird lovers around the world. She couldn't have asked for more than that.

