

Founder of 1 of North America's largest bird sanctuary dies

July 20 2015, by Jim Suhr



In this Wednesday, April 29, 2015, photo, Walter Crawford, founder and director at the World Bird Sanctuary talks in his office at the sanctuary in Valley Park, Mo.. Walter "Stormy" Crawford, the founder of one of North America's largest bird sanctuaries whose passion was fueled by a fascination for exotic jungle birds cultivated during a childhood in Venezuela, died Friday, July 17, 2015, at Mercy Hospital St. Louis in Creve Coeur, Mo., from complications linked to a recent hip surgery, according to the sanctuary. (J.B. Forbes/St. Louis Post-Dispatch via AP)

Walter "Stormy" Crawford Jr., whose founding of one of North America's largest bird conservation and rehabilitation centers was fueled by a childhood spent in Venezuela fascinated by exotic jungle birds, has died in Missouri. He was 70.

Crawford, executive director of the World Bird Sanctuary in suburban St. Louis, died at a hospital Friday after complications from a recent hip surgery, said Jeff Meshach, the sanctuary's director. The sanctuary—spanning roughly 300 acres of hardwood forest—has rehabilitated and returned more than 800 raptors to the wild since Crawford founded it in the late 1970s.

"With his passing, it's unbelievable how many emails we get, phone calls, people showing up here. Everybody is in shock," Meshach told The Associated Press on Monday. "As overwhelming as it might be, it's just humbling and a good experience to know how many he touched around the country and world."

Crawford spent his boyhood years in Venezuela, where his father worked as a field engineer for a petroleum company—an experience that influenced Crawford's eventual decision to make ornithology his career.

The affable Army veteran served in the Vietnam War and later attended colleges in Missouri and Mississippi before getting a job at the St. Louis Zoo.

Crawford—with support from legendary St. Louis Zoo director Marlin Perkins, the famed host of television's "Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom"—founded in 1977 the Raptor Rehabilitation and Propagation Project. The site eventually became the World Bird Sanctuary next to St. Louis County's Lone Elk Park, and Crawford left the zoo in 1982 to run the nonprofit sanctuary full-time.

The sanctuary's hundreds of rehabilitated birds have included peregrine falcons, bald eagles and the American common barn owl, one of the most endangered raptors native to Missouri.

The sanctuary takes in injured or sick birds—often brought in by federal wildlife or customs agents—and nurses them back to health. Those that cannot be returned to the wild are used in breeding or educational programs.

"Walter was a much-loved and respected public figure—acknowledged for his pioneering work in the field of raptor conservation and preservation," John Kemper, the World Bird Sanctuary's board president, said in a statement.

Kemper said the board, the sanctuary's full-time staff of 16, and dozens of volunteers "are committed to continuing Walter's legacy as one of the most innovative raptor centers in the world, and look forward to sharing this vision with our supporters in the next few weeks."

A funeral is scheduled for Thursday.

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