

Falconer, rehabilitator, breeder, conservationist, and educator, Augustus Donald Ben David inspired an appreciation for raptors in thousands.

Gus lived his entire life on Martha's Vineyard Island off the coast of Massachusetts, but he was known to falconers across the country and to wildlife conservationists around the world. He was raised on a small family farm when the Island was so rural that conservation was not yet a concern. Island residents were few, and wildlife mentors even fewer, except for those elders who taught him to hunt and fish. But Gus's interests extended to all forms of wildlife and thus it was, at the age of 9, he climbed a tree and took his first eyass Red-tailed Hawk and began to teach himself falconry. Over the decades to follow, there were many more birds to fly—and many people of all ages and walks of life to teach.

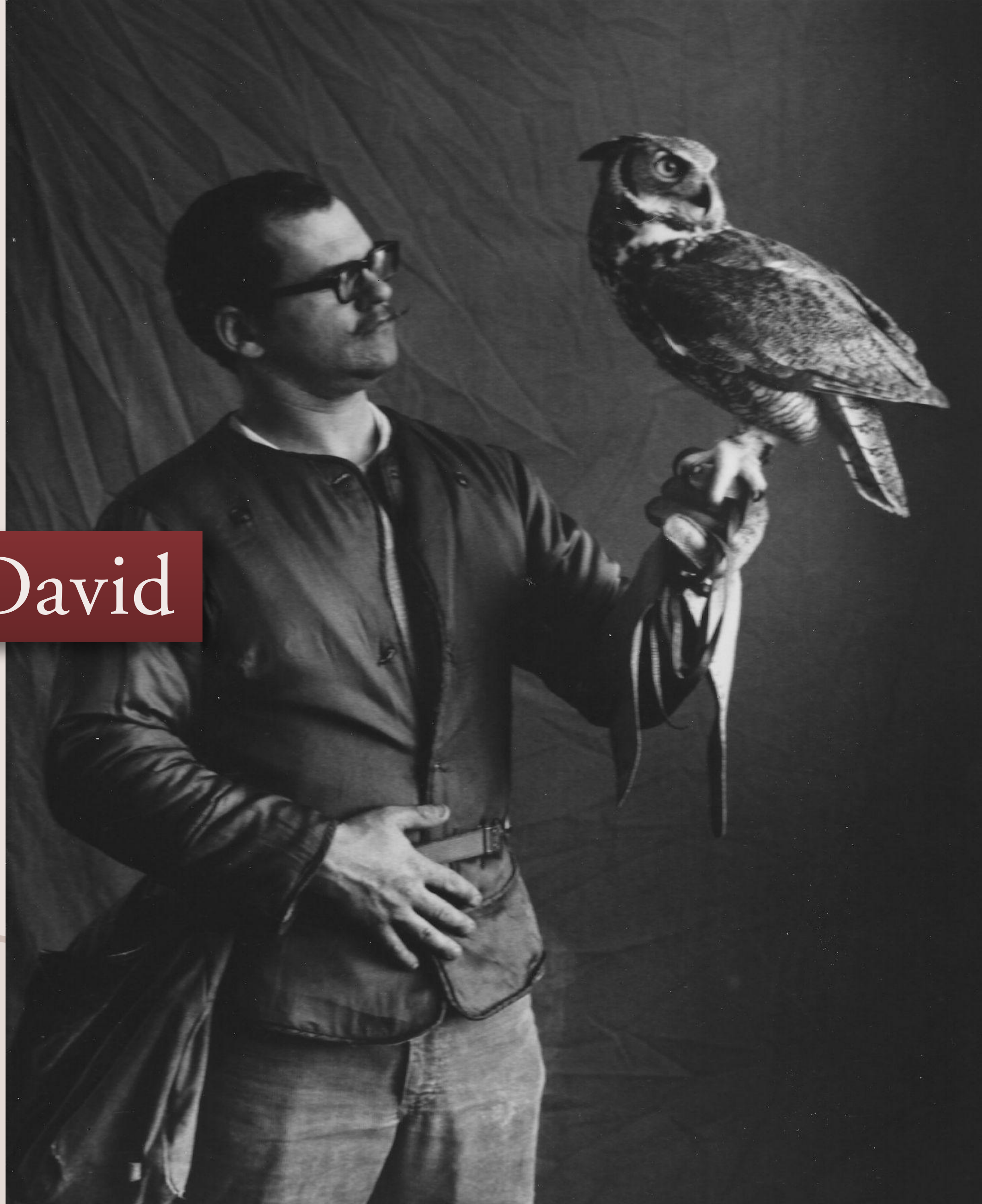
Donald “Gus” Ben David

November 22, 1943 – July 4, 2024

Conservation education was not a recognized field as Gus came of age, much less a paying job. So one of his earliest ventures, with his uncle Gus, was to create Gus N' Gus Wild Animal Farm on a portion of his family's farm. There he maintained native and exotic animals from around the world, including eagles, owls, hawks, pythons and boas, alligator snapping turtles and a menagerie of New England wildlife. For the remainder of his life, a mainstay of his teaching was educating with the aid of live animals.

He soon gained recognition as the Island's leading naturalist and in 1969 was recruited to become the first director of the Felix Neck Wildlife Sanctuary, a property of the Massachusetts Audubon Society, a post he held until 2005. Through youth programs at Felix Neck and many hundreds of public presentations with wildlife, Gus inspired thousands of Island residents and visitors. Many will remember Wrangler, his Bald Eagle, Hoot the Great Horned Owl, and Chemali, his Golden Eagle who, for 41 years, seemed to some of us more like Gus's companion than a teaching aid.

Inevitably, Gus's encyclopedic knowledge of nature caught the attention of others, locally and afar. As a waterfowl breeder, he was inducted to serve on the board of the International Wild Waterfowl Association. As the local expert, he became the go-to person for rescue and rehab of thousands of wild animals from otters to oiled sea birds. Among many wildlife projects, perhaps his most enduring was erecting osprey nests with an all-volunteer crew, which began in 1972.



Today there are over 150 nest poles across Martha's Vineyard, the first population in southern New England to recover from the era of DDT. Under Gus's shepherding, the Vineyard population of Ospreys grew from 2 pairs in 1971 to over 140 today.

Gus never stopped looking for more ways to teach about wildlife. He created the Vineyard Serpentarium, which, after he retired from Felix Neck relocated to his own property and became the World of Reptiles (which also showcased many avian species, including raptors).

Gus's public persona was as a wildlife authority, which brought him into contact with some of the most wealthy and powerful people in the US, including presidents and first ladies. But in his personal life he was the ultimate local, who reveled in Island history and had a prodigious memory of Island families and their relationships. To close friends he was a rascal, a prankster, an instigator and teller of misadventures, a drinker of whiskey, and a lover of anything that was big in size or spirit. Select falconers and close friends will recall moonlit, snow-clad winter nights hunting with this Great Horned Owl. Apprentice falconers will remember being sent into briar thickets like beagles, while a red tail waited overhead. Always these outings were concluded with humor, refreshments, and ultimately treasuring the beauty of the land, the prowess of the bird, and the skill of prey. Among his friends in the world of falconry were Rob Bierregaard, Steve Bodio, Tom Chase, Pete Jenny, and Morely Nelson.

Gus rose to prominence not in spite of humble beginnings, but because of them. As a result, he cared not at all what one did for a living or what their social status was; above all else, he respected one's kindness to others. No matter who you were, Gus could infect you with his love of wildlife and his Island community, and everyone left his company feeling a bit more grounded in their own lives. If there was a lesson to be learned from Gus's life, perhaps it was that fulfillment can be achieved—regardless of one's career—by following one's passion, drawing independent conclusions and abiding with utter authenticity and generosity.

On his 81st birthday friends and family combined Gus's ashes with those of his beloved Golden Eagle, Chemali, and placed them in the Osprey nest he watched every spring and summer. Along with the ashes we tucked into the sticks of the nest a falcon's bell and a small bottle of Canadian Club. The following spring, the Osprey pair returned and reared yet another brood on his bed of ashes, and thus Gus continues to be intermingled with the wildlife to which he dedicated his life. (We're not sure what they did with the whiskey.)



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