

Brian was the youngest of three boys in Don and Leatha's family of four children. He was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan and along with his siblings enjoyed playing in the water at Lake Michigan during the summer months and riding with his brothers in a toboggan sliding down the snow-covered sand dunes in the winter. In the early 1960s the family moved to Riverside, CA as his dad took on a new job. Once the family was established, the boys made friends quickly and found activities that piqued their interest. Brian's older brothers Don, and middle brother Mike, started little league baseball and when Brian was old enough, he followed suit also playing the sport. It seemed once one of the boys got involved with something, each of the other two followed along regardless of who started the activity. The boys were best friends! As time passed the family made several moves with their dad's job change. They left Riverside, CA and moved to Stockton, CA for a few years and then to Woodland, CA. The boys were now of the age to acquire hunting licenses and took up hunting in Stockton with new friends and had over the course of being out in the field gained their first exposure to birds of prey.



Hildebrandt Family circa 1964 in Riverside, CA right to left, brother Don and Mike, Mom, Dad, Brian and sister Marsha.

# Brian Wilks Hildebrandt

Born December 22, 1956

Died April 23, 2024

They found a passage Red-tailed Hawk that had been displaced during a strong spring storm. The boys decided to keep the bird and help it along until it could be released. They learned a lot about the bird as the days passed and helped it to free flight mostly by trial and error. Making the move from Stockton to Woodland, the boys were now teens, age 17, 15 and 13 and continued with baseball and added basketball in addition to hunting small game and ducks in the area. Having been exposed to caring for a raptor in Stockton, Brian's brother Mike decided to acquire a passage Red-tail Hawk. He did so by climbing a tree and removing one from a nest. All the boys took turns caring for the bird and from their experience in Stockton had some knowledge of what to do. They also gained additional insight about falconry from books they picked up at the local library. As they got older and went off to college Don went to a local Junior College and then on to State College playing baseball. Mike received a full-ride baseball scholarship to Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ and Brian played baseball at Butte College near Chico, CA and then on to the College of the Desert in Palm Desert, CA where he played basketball and baseball. Brian fell in love during his college years and soon thereafter married his sweet-heart Kelly. They moved to Kingwood, Texas to start his business career and family. As time passed, Brian and his wife Kelly moved back to CA to be near family and friends.



The Hildebrandt family (circa 1980) in Kingwood, TX. Family members from right to left- brother Don, sister Marsha, Mom, Dad, Brian and brother Mike.

As their two boys grew, they followed dad's path of playing sports. Both boys, Scott and Logan, played basketball and baseball in their youth. Brian was soon coaching the boys up until high school until they went off to school. Once the boys were out of school, Brian focused on his career and playing softball in a variety of leagues. As he neared retirement, Brian contacted his older brother Don to ask about falconry and what it took to become a falconer. Don had been practicing the sport not too far from where Brian lived for 5 years. Brian's current business position gave him flexibility and he knew, at this point in his professional career, he would have time to dedicate himself to being a falconer. Over the next year Brian went with his brother on falconry outings, like trapping, training and hunting. He learned much of his in-field knowledge from watching his brother and other falconers tend to their birds' needs. He also joined the California Hawking Club (CHC) to gain additional in-site from its members and to formulate a list of things to do as he started his journey to become a falconer.

In 2016 and with a thumbs up from his spouse, he took the falconry test, renewed his hunting license and became an apprentice. He constructed a mew and weathering area and once his facilities were inspected, it was time to go trap a bird. With the quarry target in his area being mostly jackrabbits, Brian wanted to trap a female passage Red-tailed Hawk. He knew from watching other apprentices the female Red-tailed Hawk can handle this size prey. Once he trapped a female Red-tailed Hawk, the fun/worry/stress began. Brian knew when the bird was manned down, dropped a few grams in weight and began eating food real training progress could be made. To get to that point he spent many hours with the bird on the glove, hooding it and getting it use to daily activities around the household. When it came time for the bird to start its training, like jump to the glove or fly to the lure, the bird responded as if its parents were asking it to perform a new task. Brian never had a problem with his approach to the bird while on a kill or lure. Brian was so confident in the bird's response, he even (not suggested by his sponsor) would whistle call his bird from a neighbor's roof to the glove for a tidbit. Brian was so excited that all his training yielded the desired results he did not realize the potential hazard that might occur while flying in the neighborhood. However, after a discussion with his sponsor, this in neighborhood training was very quickly abandoned.



Brian with his first passage female Red-tailed Hawk (2016).



Brian with his 2nd year Red-tailed Hawk-the daily double!



Brian's mature dark morph female Red-tailed Hawk he acquired from a fellow falconer.



Brian out in the field hawking with a team of Harris Hawk.

Brian had fair hunting success with his first trapped female Red-tailed Hawk. It ended up taking a few black-tailed jack-rabbits over the course of hunting season. When the hunting season ended, Brian fattened up the bird over the course of several weeks and released it in early summer. He recalls it was exciting to let it go and also that it was somewhat difficult. He had put in so much time with the bird getting it through its first season; caring for it, training it, expanding its ability and confidence to catch larger game. In the end he realized the bird was in a much better position to survive and eventually breed as it returned to the wild. Brian knew, as a falconer, he had a positive impact on one of nature's natural resources. He felt really good about what he had accomplished with his first falconry bird.

Brian was fortunate in his second apprentice year, to trap a bit larger female Red-tailed Hawk than he had in his first-year bird. He could tell as it was manded down and started to respond, the bird was going to be a good hunter. And sure enough it was a great hunter. Once the bird knew what the target was and gained confidence it would go great distances to catch its prey. His bird ended up catching 21 black-tail jackrabbits during the hunting season. And on two occasions it took doubles! Brian was thrilled to have such a good hunting partner. Beyond hunting his birds, Brian also spent time at his grandkids' school on show-and-tell days talking about birds of prey and passing along his knowledge to others about falconry. He also participated in the CHC rehab program taking a displaced first year Red-tailed Hawk to a point of release back to the wild. He also helped rehab a Great Horned Owl in between his second and third falconry season. Brian was instrumental in using his business and personal contacts to gain hunting ground for him and his inter-circle and assisted in several workshops and meets for the Californian Hawking Club. As his falconry journey continued, he exposed his kids and grandkids to the sport in the hopes of one day they would get involved in falconry.

Brian knew early in his journey to become a falconer you have to put in the time to be successful, there were no short cuts. For him as well as most who take this journey, it went from, an interest, to a hobby, to a passion, to a lifestyle. He embraced this dedication over his short 7-year falconry journey, and it showed with the relationship he fostered with the birds. They were all special to him. He loved being part of a small unique century's old historical art form. He knew not many people can say they have practiced and lived the ancient sport of falconry. Brian enjoyed having a unique skill and the enjoyment it brought him and others that knew and flew with him. He especially relished the excitement kids showed in seeing and hearing about birds of prey. He knew it would be a special moment in their life being that close to a bird of prey. Brian is gone now. He will be missed by all who knew and flew with him. I believe he still practices the art and sport of falconry but now at a higher level and with others who have made the transition to the heavens above.

Brian with brother Don and fellow hawker Pete Martin posing after a successful hunt.



Brian talking falconry with kids at his Grandson's school.



Brian and Wife Kelly with Grandsons, Austin and Ayden and his Red-tailed Hawk Lola and their two dogs.



Brian with his dog, Jessy, and recently acquired female Harris Hawk Abby enjoying the day.



Brian with Hooty, his rehab Great Horned Owl and dog Charlie.