



AL PLECHNER : W I L D L I F E C O N S E R V A T I O N I S T



Plechner nursed this Golden Hawk back to health at his private wildlife

A young doe with a broken leg had just been brought to veterinarian and wildlife conservationist Al Plechner when this interview took place at the California Animal Hospital. She had been hit by a car in the Santa Monica Mountains, and lay faintly trembling, wrapped in a flowered quilt, on the treatment counter.

"I'll pin her leg and plate it," said Dr. Plechner as the doe was carried off for X-rays. "Then if she has a quality of life so she can be set loose, that's what I'll do." If all goes well, the deer will be taken to his wildlife refuge in Cold Canyon to recover and be released.

A Hobby with a History

Both the refuge and Al's work with wildlife are a "hobby," he says. The free services he provides are the result of a future-minded project begun some years ago.

A 1966 graduate of U.C. Davis, his interest in wildlife conservation grew as he saw species being trucked out of the Santa Monicas. There were basically no places around to take wild animals and no services for them. He had the idea to find an area where a refuge could be maintained, and where he could raise his family and do some agriculture to make the place self-sufficient.

He found such a place in 1974. There was forage, the necessary water for a wildlife habitat, and land enough for a vineyard. (Proceeds from the wines he produces, sold under the Calabasas Cellars label, now help support the project.) A plan for soil conservation and small reservoirs was drawn up by

the Resource Conservation District, and put in. The refuge began with blessings from the departments of Interior, and Fish and Game.

But in 1978, with the Santa Monica Mountains parklands established and the Coastal Act firmly in place, Al got snarled in red tape. The parklands people wanted to put a trail through the refuge, for equestrian and recreational uses, that would hook up with the backbone Trail. Then State Attorney General Younger ordered him to stop work on the refuge or be fined ten-thousand a day.

Plechner was issued a Coastal Violation and required to take out a permit for the project which would be granted if he gave access for the trail. A sturdy sort, he believes in a right way to do things. It took seven years before he was allowed to continue the project and live on his land. A broader story of the goings on will appear soon in *People Magazine*.

Fighting the 'Redesign of Nature'

Why did he undertake the refuge project which is in the true sense a life work? He has a wholistic philosophy based on biologically sound practices, and values nature not only for its beauty, but also for its ways and means. We have an inheritance from nature, he believes, that should be maintained. Mankind can outsmart itself in redesigning nature and often loses wild species as a result. Take what has happened over generations of unsound breeding practices with pet species.

Dr. Plechner's veterinary research with pets has shown that many ailments and

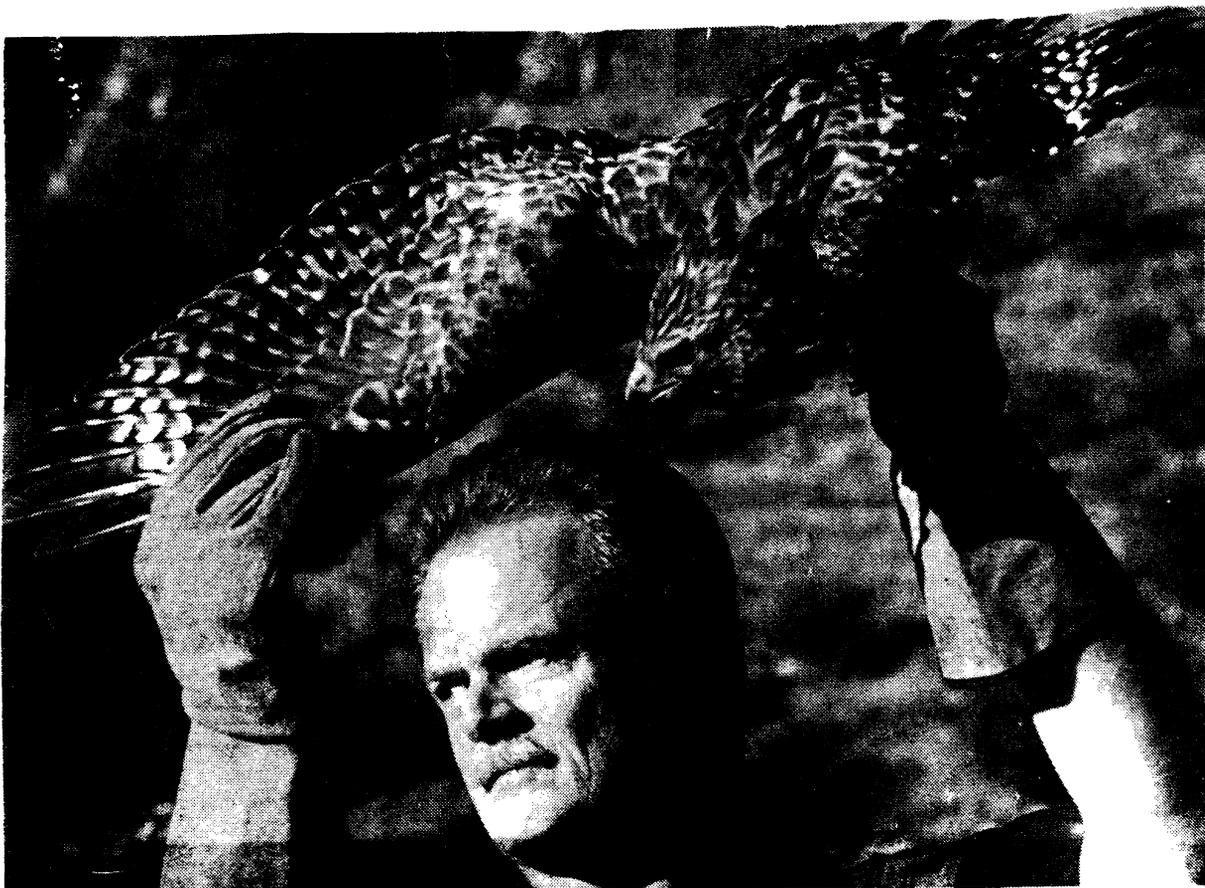
allergies can be accounted for by fashions in breeding and feeding practices. His findings and helpful hints for pet owners are out in a book, *Pet Allergies*. As you might guess, proceeds from its sale also go toward the wildlife project.

The health of an animal, he says, can be assessed by a blood test, and the results utilized for both preventative and curative purposes. Some things to avoid giving pets are hi-protein pet food, any chemical additives, chew sticks, and sugary munchies. Allergic problems can result, such as runny eyes, diarrhea, hair loss, and severe reaction to fleas. He has created a line of pet products and foods which are hypoallergenic. For any species, diet should match the nutritional needs.

He thinks there will be revelations about human health as medicine finds out more about the relationship of diet to the endocrine-immune system. "Maybe we'll get back to eating berries, roots and plants. There's a move afoot to eat game like elk that are being range-fed."

More and more wild species are coming into the Plechner refuge or, like the ducks evicted from a canal at the Marina, being brought in. The mallards are adapting to the mountains and sharing the reservoirs with other animals. He wishes pet stores would not sell the baby ducks, chicks, etc. because most are abandoned when they grow up.

Plechner tells a story about the problem of dogs that are abandoned in the mountains where they can become feral and hunt in packs. Three of these dogs were chasing a



... Moments before release

fawn at his refuge in one of the vineyards. Hearing a bleating, he thought the fawn had been cornered. A gnarly old stag was also in the vineyard, having jumped the fence to munch grapes. As it turned out, the stag had chased the dogs, had hung one of them up over a fence corner, and the fawn escaped in fine shape.

A Fragile Situation

"There will have to be a conscience," Al says, "and a conscious effort if we are going to have any of the indigenous species left. They are the last holdouts of real living with nature. They were here a long time before we were, and have a right in my opinion."

As the mountains have been opened up for development and recreation, the attitude has been let the animals live up a mountain somewhere else, but now houses are there. The animals are crowded into remaining micropockets and seen straying on roads.

Although resource conservation is doing a good job of preserving nearly extinct plants and trees, he says wildlife is in the most fragile situation. Plechner would like to see legislation to give a tax break to people holding large acreages which could be utilized as refuge for wildlife. There are agencies like the Conservancy, Sierra Club, and Wildlife Alliance which can help with conservation and enhancing habitats. The Conservation District has

much information as well as literature for people interested in identifying and fostering indigenous species.

When people see a sick or injured wild animal, it is best to call an animal shelter or Fish and Game. They will pick up the animal which may be brought to Dr. Plechner for treatment like the doe was. Soon he hopes to complete a treatment "barn" at the refuge, which should not be thought of as a petting zoo.

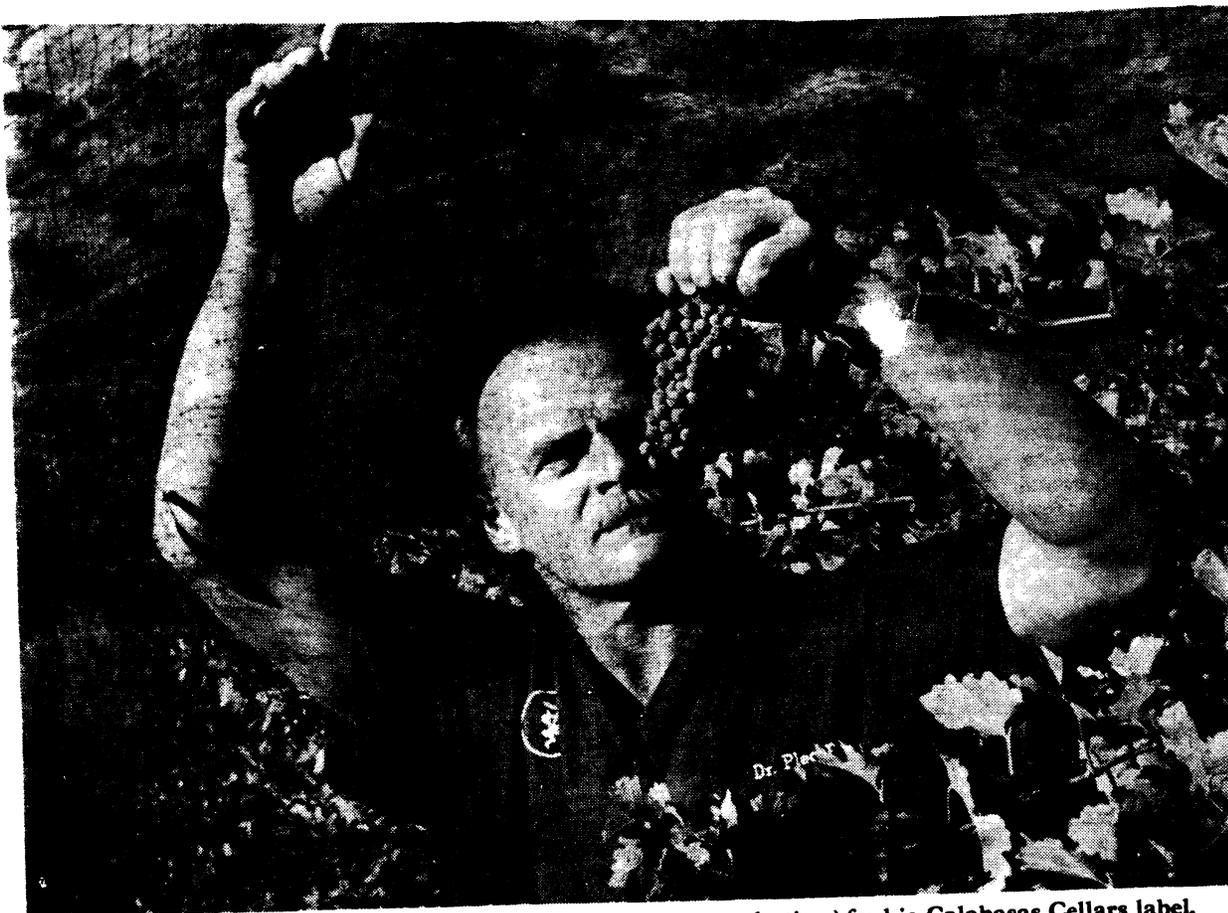
"If that doe gets frightened," he says, "once she's released to recover in a confined area—boy, that's it."

He is getting his second wind on the project after the delay and expense of the coastal conflict. That conflict of interest highlighted the question, why save wildlife? His answer has to do with values.

"We live in a ME society of plastic values. People can't see past their noses for wanting more and more items. What is the value of a beautiful hummingbird or a bird of prey?—my favorite... Wild animals are the last beings on earth not redesigned by Man. Some of the things we strive for are destructive. What legacy do we want to leave our children, what quality of life?—to be president of a multinational corporation?

"There has to be more consciousness of how we do ourselves in. Nothing wrong with making a buck, but there's an ethical way—conservation, putting back into the environment better than we take out." ■

Mary Miller is a frequent contributor to the Messenger.



Dr. Al Plechner examines Santa Monica mountain-grown grapes destined for his Calabosas Cellars label.