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## **After 18 Years, Visionary Founder of Eyes in the Sky Heads in a New Direction**

**Santa Barbara, CA (August 27, 2018)** – The Santa Barbara Audubon Society held a farewell celebration in honor of Eyes in the Sky (EITS) founder and Director Gabriele Drozdowski at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History on Sunday, August 26.

Because of Gabriele’s vision to create a nature education program using rehabilitated birds of prey, thousands of schoolchildren and Museum visitors have learned about the wildlife living around us, and what humans can do to either harm or help our winged neighbors.

If you’ve visited the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History (SBMNH) on a weekend afternoon, then you may have met the feathered ambassadors of Eyes in the Sky. Under the Museum’s big oak tree, volunteers present seven rehabilitated raptors to share the birds’ stories of injury, disability, and recovery, while encouraging visitors to take a closer look for these local species in the wild.



Gabriele and Max the Great Horned Owl at Gabriele’s Farewell Celebration on Aug 26, 2018.

When visitors first see Max the Great Horned Owl, Ivan the Red-tailed Hawk, Kisa the Peregrine Falcon, Athena the Barn Owl, Puku the Western Screech Owl, and American Kestrels Kachina and Kanati with their volunteer handlers, it is common to hear both adults and children exclaim, “Whoa! What is that?” or “Oh! Is that real?” Seeing these magnificent birds at an arm’s distance is a memorable moment, and for many, an once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

SBMNH President & CEO Luke Swetland remarks, “Gabriele’s vision and dedication has given us all the opportunity to appreciate these magnificent birds of prey in a very special way and the Museum is delighted to provide an ongoing home for Santa Barbara Audubon’s Eyes in the Sky program.”

In 1998, Gabriele Drozdowski and her late husband Jim Walker—both experienced bird handlers—began to care for two injured raptors: Max, a Great Horned Owl, and Ivan, a Red-tailed Hawk. As she rehabilitated the birds, Gabriele realized that Max, Ivan, and their stories needed to be shared and asked the Santa Barbara Audubon Society (SBAS) if it would take her idea under its wing. SBAS agreed, and the Eyes in the Sky (EITS) program was born.

Over the past two decades, Gabriele and her corps of EITS volunteers have brought the birds to the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, local libraries, Santa Barbara Botanic Garden, Boys & Girls Clubs, senior living communities, and many elementary schools. She created the “Meet Your Wild Neighbor” program, a five-



week series including live bird visits, field trips, and curriculum to teach students about local birds and environmental stewardship.

In 2004, Dr. Karl Hutterer, then SBMNH Executive Director, suggested that SBAS build an aviary on the Museum grounds and run the EITS program from there. After signing a Memorandum of Understanding in fall 2005, SBAS immediately began fundraising for the MAX (Museum Aviary eXhibit) Project. In 2009, SBAS turned the MAX Project into its Birds of Prey Campaign, and successfully raised over \$250,000. Built in the Museum's Backyard, the aviary opened in December 2010.

Dr. Hutterer notes, "Offering personal encounters with raptors, Gabriele conveyed a deep understanding of nature to countless children and adults and enriched their lives in a unique way."

Gabriele has received many accolades for her vision and dedication to wildlife including the Santa Barbara Independent's Local Hero Award in 2013, and SBMNH's Legacy Award in January 2018, on behalf of EITS.

Thanks to Gabriele's two decades of leadership, the EITS program is stronger than ever with a corps of volunteers who logged more than 5,600 hours last year.

Gabriele shares, "My favorite part of Eyes in the Sky is watching McKinley School elementary students' reactions to seeing a real live Great Horned Owl (Max). From there on and into the future, I hear 'How's Max?' Some of these students are in high school now."

Santa Barbara Audubon Society added, "These lasting impressions testify powerfully to EITS' impact on the community and highlight the importance of building on Gabriele's strong foundation. We have appointed an Interim Director for EITS and look forward to a promising future for our flagship educational program."



Gabriele and Max at SBMNH's 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Legacy Awards, January 2018



### **About Eyes in the Sky**



Eyes in the Sky (EITS) has been Santa Barbara Audubon Society's key wildlife education program since 2000. It features seven birds of prey that serve as education ambassadors. All were rescued and rehabilitated and, due to permanent disabilities, can no longer survive in the wild. EITS is the only licensed raptor education program in Santa Barbara County. The birds' live presence and their unique stories of survival educate about impacts of human activities, good and bad, and foster respect and understanding for wild species and their habitats. For more information, visit [www.eyesinthesky.org](http://www.eyesinthesky.org).

### **About the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History**

*Powered by Science. Inspired by Nature.* Founded in 1916, the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History inspires a thirst for discovery and a passion for the natural world. The Museum seeks to connect people to nature for the betterment of both, and prides itself on being *naturally different*. For more information, visit [www.sbnature.org](http://www.sbnature.org).

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