
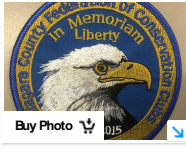


## Do It: Rock star eagle being remembered

 **Leo Roth, @leoroth** 11:51 p.m. EDT March 18, 2016



(Photo: LEO ROTH/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

For 30 years, the Niagara County Federation of Conservation Clubs has produced handsome collector's patches featuring a variety of fish and wildlife.

The cloth circles are sold to raise money to help pay for conservation projects. With that in mind, the 2016 patch is certain to be a best-seller. Featured this year is the bald eagle, only it's not just any bald eagle.

The blue-and-gold-colored ornament reads "In Memoriam, Liberty, 1988-2015" in honor of western New York's most beloved and famous feathered friend, an environmental ambassador who wooed audiences at countless wildlife education events for more than a quarter century.

Liberty, whose devoted handlers, Paul and Anne Schnell, relocated from Hilton to Chino Valley, Arizona, last June, died en route. While every precaution had been taken to ensure Liberty's comfort and safety in a custom-built trailer, the five-day, 2,300-mile ride proved to be too much. She was 27 and suffered from osteoarthritis.

"Liberty gave us all more than we ever gave to her," Paul Schnell wrote in an email to friends when he broke the sad news. "As her devoted guardian and daily caretaker for 26 years, she was by my side as the conservation message was shared with tens of thousands. I was merely a messenger. Liberty was the cornerstone."

Gone but never to be forgotten, Liberty's life and legacy will be celebrated in many ways this spring.

In addition to the collector's patch being sold for \$5 — call treasurer Dave Whitt at (716) 754-2133 — the Niagara County Federation of Conservation Clubs (NCFCC) has laser engraved 10 hunting knives with Liberty's image to be used in raffles, the proceeds going toward sending kids to DEC's Camp Rushmore. Also, a commemorative brick will be placed at the Don Bronson Memorial Conservation Wall of Fame in Lockport; Bronson was a revered master hunter safety instructor.

Meanwhile, Braddock Bay Raptor Research, celebrating its 30th anniversary of scientific study and community outreach, has also selected the bald eagle as its featured raptor in honor of Liberty for its annual Bird of Prey Days taking place April 22-24 at Braddock Bay State Park.



Paul Schnell

Paul and Anne Schnell moving their birds of prey/wildlife education business to Arizona. LEO ROTH/staff photographer



**ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE**

Liberty the eagle dies during cross-country move

A display showcasing Liberty's life, including memorabilia, is being assembled for the popular rite of spring. Afterward, the display will travel to the Montezuma Audubon Center in Wayne County — its 10th annual Wildlife Festival is May 7.

Liberty was a mainstay at Bird of Prey Days and the New York Power Authority's Wildlife Festival co-sponsored with NCFCC.

After all this rock star raptor and the Schnells did to help promote a deeper understanding and appreciation of our natural world in children and adults alike, honoring them was the least they could do, said John Butcher, vice president of the Niagara County group.

"I have a picture of my daughter, who is now 22, feeding Liberty at the Wildlife Festival when she was a little girl and the expression on her face is priceless," Butcher said. "She's kind of 'I want to do this but I'm kind of afraid but it's just too cool to pass up.' That's my best memory, and just the way Paul was with the kids. When they were a little timid, he'd bring them right in and they'd relax. The look on their

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faces when Paul would let them get close to Liberty, that was special."

Liberty was a 7-month old rescued eagle from Alaska with a broken wing when Schnell took over her care from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service in January 1989. At the time, he was just the second citizen in New York with the expertise and credentials who was granted an eagle on "permanent loan."



Anne and Paul Schnell with Liberty, who was among the most photographed bald eagles in captivity. (Photo: ANTHONY D'ONOFRIO/ 2013)

After Liberty's passing, the Schnells were required by law to turn over the body to the National Eagle Repository near Denver, Colorado. The facility, founded in the early 1970s, collects dead bald and golden eagles and distributes their feathers and various parts to Native Americans and Alaskan Natives for use in cultural and religious ceremonies. It is illegal for an average citizen to possess any part of an eagle.

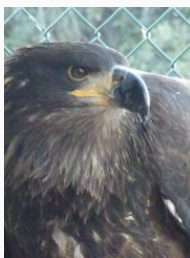
It was the third time the Schnells went through the heart-wrenching process, having lost Solo, Liberty's companion, and Bron-yr-aur, an adult golden eagle, in the past. For years, the Schnells shipped the molted feathers of their "education eagles" to the repository.

Considering Liberty's fame, Paul had hoped U.S. Fish & Wildlife would make an exception to its strict rules and allow him to decide what to do with the body. There was interest from Montezuma Audubon Center in having a taxidermist and curators create a permanent educational display.

"They wrote a letter of support for us but the federal government still said no," Anne Schnell said. "It's the way the laws are written. They won't even tell you where the bird is going. That's really hard for the people who have cared for an animal for 27 years to just give it up, because you don't end up getting closure."



ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE  
Couple's conservation legacy takes flight to Arizona



Joy, a new bald eagle from Alaska acquired by Paul and Anne Schnell last month. Joy was rescued with an injured wing that required the amputation of a wing tip. (Photo: PROVIDED)

Still, Liberty's memory soars onward.

"It's so gratifying and heartening," Paul Schnell said of the outpouring of support through phone calls, sympathy cards, emails and planned tributes. "I'll be forever grateful. People have referred to her as a 'national treasure.' Her scope wasn't that big, but certainly in New York, the neighboring states, she was there when a bald eagle was required."

Like at the watershed 1997 ceremony at the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge that was part of the federal process of de-listing the bald eagle as endangered. She even had appearances on *Today* and *Rachael Ray* television shows.



Long-time Hilton resident Paul Schnell, now of Chino Valley, Arizona, takes clients on falconry adventures. Here he works with two Harris's hawks. (Photo: PROVIDED)

Thirteen other flying creatures the Schnells care for did arrive safely in Arizona where the first family of feathers has successfully set up a new business, Arizona's Raptor Experience

([arizonasraptorexperience.com](http://arizonasraptorexperience.com)). Clients can take "hawk walks" at 5,000 feet and experience falconry or watch as the Schnells fly their birds from a gloved fist for some spectacular photo opportunities set against desert vistas.

"We had to re-invent ourselves but it's great to be able to do this full time and I'm the happiest I've been," said Paul Schnell, who with Anne retired from their 9-to-5 jobs to

follow their passion. "We're meeting wonderful people, amazing naturalists here and photographers."

And though there will only be one Liberty, they have brought another eagle into the brood, receiving a female juvenile bald eagle from the Alaska Raptor Center last month, another non-flight bird missing a wing tip. Named Joy, she doesn't have Liberty's well-mannered temperament, but Paul Schnell loves a challenge.

"I don't know if this bird will ever be like Liberty but I hope to get her up running in a year," he said. "Right now, I'm not handling her, she's handling me."

Meanwhile, there are trees and wildflowers to plant on a 40-acre spread, more new friends to make, more birds to care for. And Liberty is never far from his thoughts. "I get on the edge of tears talking about her," Paul Schnell said. "But she's still with me every day in spirit."



Leo Roth tries his hand at hawk handling with wildlife educators Paul and Anne Schnell. LEO ROTH/staff photographer

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