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## Local veterinarian George Messenger preparing for ground-breaking falcon surgery

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Tiny, fluffy feathers float down the stairs and gather in the corners of Jim and Nancy Cowan's Deering home. The couple is going to have to spend more time sweeping than they expected this spring.

Banner, a lanner falcon from the couple's New Hampshire School of Falconry, is living in their spare bedroom, and she's not moving out anytime soon.

Banner can't live in the mew with other falcons because of cataracts she developed last year. A landmark surgery to fix her eyes, scheduled for last week, has been delayed at least two months as experts from across the country and around the world weigh in on the procedure, and everyone waits for the first artificial falcon lenses ever made by a pediatric ophthalmology supply company.

"We're poised and ready to go at any time," Nancy Cowan said. "We feel responsible for all our animals, for their quality of life. The risk is worth taking to give her a life worth living."

The risks ahead of Banner are plenty.

First, there's the general risks of surgery and of anesthesia. If the surgery takes too long, she may not wake up, and the more complicated and innovative the surgery, the longer it will likely take.

There's the risk of infection that comes from implanting anything into the body, and the risk that the fragile lenses could break or dislodge as the bird's optic muscles move, said George Messenger, the

veterinarian at Fisherville Animal Hospital in Concord, where the operation is slated to take place.

This will be the second time that veterinarians try to implant artificial lenses into the eyes of a raptor, and the first time into a falcon.

The first such operation was with a great horned owl, Messenger said.

He's talked with the UC Davis professor who performed that operation, and with doctors in Germany and Saudi Arabia who are interested in the outcome.

"It's taken us a long time to determine what the chances are for success because we had to get a hold of all these people who are really important and really busy, and really far away," he said.

Massachusetts-based veterinarian Ruth Marrion will perform the operation and is negotiating with a company that usually makes lenses for children to make a pair to Banner's specifications. They should take about two months to make, and in the meantime, Messenger and Marrion will take intricate measurements of the bird's eyes.

Some of the experts have told them they won't succeed. But Messenger said the field of avian ophthalmology will benefit, no matter the outcome of this particular bird.

"The eyes of these birds are so amazing. To go in and actually be manipulating one that is almost blind, and turn it back into one that could be flown? That would be pretty neat, but we're also trying to push the limits of what people know," Messenger said.

Maybe Banner won't be able to fly again, but in the Middle East, where falconry is a popular sport, birds with cataracts are either euthanized or left to cower in the corner of their mews, afraid of the blurry shapes moving around them.

What they learn in this surgery could help all those birds, he said.

Cowan has more humble goals.

She'd like Banner to be able to see well enough to go back to the mew. She doesn't expect the bird will be able to hunt, but she could live a comfortable life – if the surgery is a success.

"I'm more worried about her living her life blind," Cowan said. "That's just untenable, letting her live in blindness. She wouldn't want to face that, and I wouldn't ask her to."

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A cataract can be seen in Banner the Lanner falcon's left eye during a visit o Fisherville Animal Hospital and Bird Clinic in Penacook for a surgery consult with George Messenger and Ruth Marrion on Friday afternoon, January 31, 2014. Nancy and Jim Cowan, of the Deering-based New Hampshire School of Falconry, brought the young bird in after realizing that she was losing her sight. (ANDREA MORALES / Monitor staff)