HE WAS ABOUT 10 YEARS OLD when a ruby-crowned kinglet in a tree near his house caught his eye. Mesmerized, actor Ian Harding followed the bird through the woods and lost his jacket somewhere along the way.

Rather than fess up to his mom, Harding said poachers stole it while he was trying to protect a few elephants. He might have gotten away with it, too, if it weren’t for one pesky detail.

Elephants are rather rare in Northern Virginia.

The Pretty Little Liars star now knows a lot more about wildlife, especially birds. “My dad definitely instilled in me a desire to go hiking and to go into the woods,” Harding says. “One of the reasons I fell in love with birds was because it’s kind of a connector to that, to nature.”

Harding visited The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center, an HSUS affiliate in Ramona, California, last summer and helped release a red-tailed hawk who had recovered from his ailments with fluids, food and rest. “I learned about this wonderful place through The HSUS,” he said. “I had been looking for somewhere in Southern California that rehabilitates wildlife, and this is an amazing place that does that.”

In this edited interview with All Animals deputy editorial director Emily Smith, Harding talked about his love for birds and his two rescued lab-poodle mixes.

WHAT DO YOU FIND FASCINATING ABOUT BIRDS?
It’s interesting, because you can’t really cuddle birds; there’s just something [about them]. They’re beautiful, they’re different, they’re varied in so many ways and you can tell a lot about a landscape by the health of the bird population. And I love the songs they sing.

TELL US ABOUT YOUR DOGS.
Mochi and Bailey are insane—they’re wonderful dogs. I had never adopted a dog before. I guess the whole thing about rescuing is there are just so many dogs. I feel like it’s an easy way to give back. You have a lifelong friend, and they’re wonderful, wonderful animals.

WHAT OTHER ANIMAL WELFARE ISSUES ARE CLOSE TO YOUR HEART?
When it comes to animals, there isn’t a cause that I’m just like, “Nah.” It’s not that animals are defenseless—it’s that they don’t have a voice. Humans do, and rule the planet for the most part, so I’m interested in any cause that gives animals consideration, whether it’s the treatment of animals in the food industry or dogfighting.

HOW DO YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA TO SUPPORT THE CAUSES YOU HOLD DEAR?
You’re in an interesting place as a celebrity—I hate saying that word. I think there’s a little bit of a responsibility to do something with it. You don’t need to cure cancer—although that’s certainly a worthy endeavor. It can be something as simple as raising awareness. You could be the biggest slacker in the world and still repost something. With social media, you can draw attention, you can raise money and you can really push what you want to say more directly than ever before.