

notes from the field...

A Golden Eagle's Shining Moment

by Jan Allen, Communications Specialist

This winter, the National Aviary was the temporary home of a beautiful young Golden Eagle, inadvertently caught in a trap in West Virginia. Around two dozen people in two states played a personal role in his amazing story. Here are some of their recollections.

One of the main projects of the National Aviary's Department of Conservation and Field Research focuses on Eastern Golden Eagles in the Appalachian region. Thus, Dr. Todd Katzner, department Director, was involved from the first day of the eagle's saga:

It was early January. I was sitting at my desk when the phone rang. It was Mike Lanzone from Powdermill Avian Research Center of the Carnegie Museum of Natural History. "Hey Todd," he said. "Feel like driving down to West Virginia to get an eagle?"

With those words, we started down an unexpected road. As part of a research study on wind power, we had put telemetry tracking devices on eagles #39 and #40 after painstakingly catching them on their fall migration through Pennsylvania. Here was a bird that had seemingly fallen into our laps, and we decided to do our best to take advantage of the situation. I loaded up my truck with a carrying crate for the eagle, just in case he was injured and needed to be brought back to Pittsburgh for rehabilitation.

Before leaving, Todd called Erin Estell, a manager in Animal Programs at the Aviary and experienced in avian first aid:

Todd told me that there was an eagle in West Virginia that had been caught in a leg-hold trap. We discussed the possibility of injury because of the trap and Dr. Pilar Fish put a first aid kit together for us—just in case. Trish Miller and Mike Lanzone from Powdermill arrived before us. They had banded the eagle and cleaned the wound on his right leg, and they saw that the injury was extensive.

When I first looked at the wound I agreed it needed more attention than we could give it right there. I did some basic first aid to stabilize him enough to travel. It was apparent to all of us that the bird should go back to the National Aviary where Dr. Fish could give him better care.

After we got back to Pittsburgh, Todd and I took the eagle down to the hospital to be examined. When Dr. Fish cleaned the wound we were able to see that the leg had been injured on both sides including the bone. The eagle would need intensive



National Aviary Photo by Naelis Palés

Dr. Todd Katzner and Erin Estell help Dr. Pilar Fish examine the eagle during a vet check in early March.

wound management if it were to survive. It looked like we were in for a long haul.

Dr. Pilar Fish is the Director of Veterinary Services at the National Aviary:

The first time I saw the eagle I thought the wounds were horrific. The bird was critically ill from the trauma. Since the wound on his leg was infected, it could not be sutured closed. We had to do intensive wound care to make it heal, which took ten weeks. But I've done a lot of eagle rehabilitation work so I was comfortable with doing this. We have a great staff and a quality hospital at the Aviary, so we can take on serious cases like this one. Even so, it took us ten days just to stabilize him.

In addition to the veterinary technicians who regularly help Dr. Fish in the hospital, the Golden Eagle's extensive care schedule required several others from the Aviary's Animal Programs staff to pitch in. Christa Wright was one of these "lucky" ones:

I'm a bird trainer at the National Aviary but I've never worked around rehabilitation centers, so I was glad to play a part. It was pretty cool to see all the effort that went into caring for the bird. I had to juggle the normal routine that I do every day in order to add on the cleaning of the eagle's enclosure. This was a challenge because I couldn't clean the enclosure while he was in it. So I would drop whatever it was



I was doing and run to do the cleaning while he was having a vet visit. The first week or so, I never even saw the eagle! I'd clean as quickly as I could and be back at my usual tasks before he got back from the hospital.

Dr. David Brandes of Lafayette College in Easton, Pennsylvania, was too far away to be directly involved with the eagle. He did come to Pittsburgh to help with preparing the eagle for his eventual release as part of the research study:

Our work focuses on the potential risks of wind turbines placed along raptor migration pathways, and on developing strategies to lessen the risks to birds like Golden Eagles. We hope to develop models from the telemetry data that will help us understand how the birds use the ridges and mountains of the Appalachians when they migrate.

Our models will help regulatory agencies to categorize the risk at possible sites. Wind power is an important resource, and we hope our project can help determine how wind turbines and magnificent raptors like the golden eagle can coexist.

Dr. Todd Katzner spent January and February catching the Golden Eagle up every day, often twice in the same day, so that the eagle could get the medications he needed:

By early March, eagle #41 was definitely well on his way to being released. I soon realized that there was a cloud on my personal horizon. This eagle needed to be released as soon as he was fit enough, so that he could readjust to life in the wild and get on with his spring migration back to Canada. But I was leaving for a research trip to Kazakhstan in mid-March, which Dr. Fish determined was sooner than the eagle could be released. Clearly my desire to see this magnificent bird fly into a blue sky conflicted with what was best for him. The eagle would have been released while I was away, about as far on the other side of the globe as possible. With a heavy heart I began to make plans. I have poignant memories of sitting in my tent in Kazakhstan, knowing that at that very time in another world, my friends and colleagues were completing the cycle that had started three months earlier with that phone call.

Trish Miller is GIS Manager at Carnegie Museum of Natural History's Powdermill Nature Reserve.

I felt privileged to be the person chosen to release #41. This was truly a wonderful moment for me. I knew that you have to release a bird as big as an eagle into the wind. If you release them with the wind, they will be pushed to the ground. Unfortunately, the wind was blowing from the direction of a small grove of trees that encircled the release site. Because #41 hadn't flown freely in a long time, I was afraid he might land on the ground before he could feel the

How Does It Do That?

Thomas Anderson, the National Aviary's IT specialist, is involved in making sure the data gets from the eagles' backpacks to our computers. He explains how it's done:

A small Platform Terminal Transmitter (PTT) device is attached to the bird's back using a lightweight vest. After we release the eagle, a solar-powered transmitter in the PTT transmits GPS data via the antenna every three days to the NOAA's polar-orbiting ARGOS satellite system. An automated script sends the data to us in an email message. Our associates at Powdermill create the maps that we then post to the National Aviary website, where you can track the movements of all the eagles in the project.

lift from the wind and fly over the trees.

Everyone was ready with cameras focused, but I waited... and waited. Finally I felt a little gust and I tossed him into the air. To my delight, he felt the lift and pumped his wings to get above the trees. He landed near the top of one to shake himself out, and then he spread his wings, caught some air, and began to soar high above us before disappearing to the east. Now all I can see of him are his dots on a map — and I'm always reminded of that special day.

You can read more on our website at www.aviary.org, where you can also follow the migration routes of all three Golden Eagles on dynamic tracking maps. The March 2006 issue of Bird Calls and the February 2007 issue of Flight Path also have related information.



Trish Miller waits for just the right moment to release Golden Eagle #41.

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