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Flying High: Wildlife Center Rehabilitates Bald And Golden Eagles



By Angela McLaughlin - Ramona Home Journal • Thu, Dec 28, 2017

A hush falls over the small group of people gathered around an innocuous-looking carrier. As the door opens, a stately golden eagle takes advantage of its newfound freedom, spreading its wings wide as it gracefully moves to perch on a nearby rock.

After taking in its surroundings for several minutes, it beats its powerful wings and soars magnificently over the treetops and the valley below.

It is another successful rehabilitation story for the Fund for Animals Wildlife Center (FFAWC) — and one that is more unique than many.

The recently rehabilitated and released golden eagle is the first to visit the center since 2011. Found by a good Samaritan in August, unable to fly but with no obvious injuries, the eagle was brought to Project Wildlife in San Diego.

back in the wild once again. In September, it was transferred to FFAWC, located at 18740 Highland

Valley Rd.

"West Nile lab testing came back with high titers, testing positive for West Nile virus," says Christine Barton, director of operations for FFAWC.

This explained the bird's inability to fly while lacking any visible injuries.

Barton adds that smaller birds with the virus are usually found dead or dying, while larger birds take longer to succumb to the secondary symptoms.

"By the time they are weak enough to be unable to fly and someone finds them, they are generally emaciated, suffering from internal and external parasites, and showing signs of CNS (central nervous system) problems — hanging head or a head tilt," she said, adding that they are typically non-combative at this stage.

After undergoing treatment and rehabilitation for the past few months, the golden eagle was deemed fit for release. It was brought back near the area where it was originally found and liberated once again.

Golden eagles gained protection in 1962, as a part of the U.S. Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

According to Barton, "They are one of the largest birds of prey in North America. They are extremely fast and have surprisingly nimble maneuverability. They are so well known and revered that they are actually the most common official national animal in the world — which is pretty awesome."

The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center, which specializes in predatory species, helps hundreds of native wild animals each year.



Barton adds that it is uncommon for the center to have golden eagles, and it is especially uncommon for them to have both golden and bald eagles at the same time.

That's why their recent situation was so unique.

The successful rehabilitation and release of the golden eagle occurred alongside the rehabilitation of a bald eagle — a circumstance Barton says she cannot recall ever happening before.

The bald eagle, a confirmed female, was first spotted near Wynola in March, unable to fly. She had a luxated left elbow, a condition where the three bones that form the elbow are not in proper alignment.

After undergoing surgery to put a pin in the elbow and staying in recovery for several months, she was eventually transferred to FFAWC in November for further evaluation and access to a larger aviary.

A complication with the first surgery led to another procedure and longer recovery time. The eagle remained in the medical ward and then a smaller aviary until she had improved enough to be moved to the larger one.

"The 150-foot flight aviary at the Wildlife Center exceeds the minimum regulations required for eagle pre-release conditioning and strengthening rehabilitation, and is the only 'flight' of its size in Southern California," says Barton.

The timing of both birds' rehabilitations was convenient all around.

"Different species don't always get along," says Barton. "We were lucky with ours; the stages of rehab treatment worked out perfectly with the bald following behind the golden eagle — starting in the medical ward, then outside to the small flight, and then to the large."

On the morning of the golden eagle release, the bald eagle was transferred into the large enclosure.

Bald eagles are also uncommon guests at the center. They were federally listed as endangered after the species began dying from DDT use. Once DDT was banned and their numbers began to bounce back, Barton says they were removed from the federal list but remain labeled as endangered in California, and federally protected throughout the United States.

The regal and majestic bird appears more relaxed in her larger enclosure, and staff at the center are hopeful that she will recover enough to be released.

The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center is helping make sure these birds get their chance at liberty once again — and the sight of such beautiful birds flying high overhead, wings spread in freedom, is enough to lift the spirits of anyone fortunate enough to see them.

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