

Raptor Rehabilitation

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Raptor rehabilitation is the rescue, medical treatment and release of orphaned or injured birds of prey. A raptor rehabilitator must possess a good working knowledge of the natural history and physiology of many types of birds, because most raptor centers provide care and rehabilitate non-raptor species too.

In Alaska, there are currently three raptor centers; the Juneau Raptor Center (JRC), Juneau, Alaska, the Alaska Raptor Rehabilitation Center (ARRC), Sitka, Alaska and Birds Treatment and Learning Center (Bird TLC), Anchorage, Alaska. These centers share the same goals and work closely with one another by providing and sharing knowledge and new information. Sometimes, a bird may be transported between facilities. For example, the Juneau Raptor Center, which is an all volunteer organization, transports birds that require constant care and much physical therapy to the ARRC or Birds TLC who have full-time staffs, avian specialist veterinarians and large flight cages.

People from all over Alaska rescue and ship injured Bald Eagles via airplane or boat. In many instances, an eagle is injured locally and volunteers rescue the bird. Volunteers from Juneau have gone swimming in the Mendenhall River, climbed trees, jumped head first into garbage dumpsters and hiked many miles - just to highlight a few of the exciting adventures. When an eagle arrives at the center, it is given an identification number and is taken into the clinic for an evaluation. It usually requires two to three people to perform a medical examination on the injured bird. Raptors use their talons and beak for defense, so leather gloves and jacket should be worn to protect oneself from serious injuries. Most raptors remain fairly calm when their head is covered and a leather falconry hood or a blanket can be used to cover the head while performing the examination. Some things done during the examination include an observation for vigilance, inspection of flight and tail feathers, as well as inspection of wings and feet for broken bones, palpation of crop for food and breastbone for fitness, examination of skin elasticity for hydration level and pupillary dilation in the case of a concussion. Many Bald Eagle patients that are treated at the centers are dehydrated and some what emaciated. Injured birds usually have difficulty in obtaining an adequate amount of food and use most of their energy maneuvering on foot trying to locate prey. Patients that are malnourished and/or dehydrated are tubed with fluids into their crop for several days before given solid food such as fish. In Juneau, after initial examination at the center, eagles are taken to one of the local animal hospitals for full-body X-rays and blood evaluation. Veterinarians prescribe medicine, which usually consists of antibiotics to treat an infection from a wound or illness.

Rehabilitation may require days for some patients, but for others it may take months. Some birds lose muscle strength and must go through physical therapy and regain physical fitness in a large flight cage. After rehabilitation and final reevaluation, many

birds are released back into their natural habitat where they may once again live in freedom. However, some birds' injuries are so severe that they can not survive in the wild; these birds are considered nonreleasable and are usually placed in breeding or educational facilities throughout the United States. Alaskan nonreleasable Bald Eagles have been placed in facilities such as: the Toledo Zoo in Ohio, Thompson Park Zoo in New York, Orange County Zoo in California and Dollywood in Tennessee.



Bald Eagle recovering in open mew at Juneau Raptor Center. Photo by Juneau Raptor Center.

Raptor centers in the United States are permitted by U.S. Fish and Wildlife and can house injured raptors on a rehabilitation permit or an educational permit. Educational permits are given to raptors who have been determined nonreleasable and will be used for public display. Raptors on a rehabilitation permit must not be kept on display for public viewing because it is important that birds do not get habituated to humans.

Education is a very important component of all raptor centers. Since rehabilitation alone cannot solve the many problems that wildlife populations encounter, wildlife educators must increase public awareness. Many Bald Eagle injuries are human-related. Every year Alaskan rehabilitators treat victims of gun shot, lead poisoning, leg hold traps and entanglement in fishing line. It is an important responsibility of raptor centers to educate the public about conservation. Many nonreleasable birds participate and travel to educational programs all over the country. We hope by giving people the opportunity to see a magnificent bird of prey up close that they will want to help protect it and the environment in which it lives.

The event of releasing recovered Bald Eagles back into the wild often draws a crowd and the media. Photo by Juneau Raptor Center.



This recovered juvenile Bald Eagle is being released in the foothills of Anchorage after being rehabilitated by TLC volunteers. Photo by David Predeger.

Research is also a component of raptor centers. The Alaska Raptor Rehabilitation Center collects blood which is used in a genetic study at the University of Minnesota. Eagles that are

released back into the wild are required to be banded with U.S. Fish and Wildlife bands in the case that these birds are ever recovered. In 1993 an injured Bald Eagle was rescued by hikers in Haines and sent to the Juneau Raptor Center for medical treatment. This eagle had been banded in the winter of 1965 by a biologist who banded 39 Bald Eagles on the Chilkat River in Haines, Alaska. Records kept by the biologist did not indicate the age estimate at time of banding. Since eagles mature at age five and estimating age after maturity is close to impossible, if the bird had been banded as <1 year of age, it would have been 28 years of age at time of recovery which is the longevity record for the Bald Eagle (Schempf, 1996).

Volunteers are an important component of raptor rehabilitation centers. Many volunteers provide daily husbandry for the birds housed at the center. Enclosures must be kept clean and sanitary to help prevent the spread of disease. Perches are scrubbed and disinfected, gravel substrate is raked and feathers are picked up.

Fish, rats, rabbits and quail are the main diets prepared for raptors which are supplemented with a multivitamin called Vita-hawk. Food not consumed within a day is thrown away and water bowls are given fresh water. A food intake log is kept for all birds which helps the operations manager monitor the diets and health of birds at the center.

I am a volunteer at the Juneau Raptor Center because I enjoy rehabilitating injured birds and watching as they fly back to freedom. When I was young, my mother would bring home orphaned baby birds and I would help my mother care for them. When they had fledged, we would release them in a safe area. Childhood exposure to my mother's compassion for animals has given me a lifelong ambition to care for creatures in distress.

Rehabilitation can be very demanding. Some of my days seem quite long because I must work my bird care schedule around my full-time job. It is not uncommon for me to tube feed an eagle, rebandage another one's foot and clean both of their kennels before going to work in the morning.

Some of my evenings and weekends are spent picking up new patients and caring for the educational birds at the center. Sounds like a large amount of work, but I am assisted by other volunteers who enjoy handling and caring for the birds - just like I do!

Rehabilitation can be rewarding and heartbreaking. In the month before writing this, there have been two bird patients that have been very memorable. The first was a Bald Eagle that was reported to be on the ground and unable to fly. As I approached the bird, I noticed its foot stained with blood. After the bird was captured by several volunteers, we realized that the foot had suffered from a compound fracture and had been almost completely amputated. The foot could not be surgically repaired. The eagle showed no sign of pain, but it was evident that this bird would no longer have a good quality of life and was euthanized.

The second patient was a Boreal Owl that had collided with something, most likely a car. The owl was suffering from a concussion and was given an injection of steroids to

decrease the swelling on its brain. I had to tube feed the owl at first, but after a couple of days he began to eat the mice that I placed in his kennel. Shortly afterwards, the owl was ready for release. As I opened my hand for the release, the owl flew into the branches high up in a nearby tree. A couple of minutes later he vanished into the forest.

Center	Released	Placed	Died	Unknown	Total
ARRC	113	89	255	0	457
TLC	78	27	62	45	212
JRC	37	27	49	0	113
total	228	143	366	45	782
% of total	29.2%	18.3%	46.8%	5.7%	100%

During 1984-1996, the raptor centers in Alaska have treated approximately 782 eagles (Table 1). Injuries have been a result of natural causes, as well as human-related causes. Almost one-third of all eagles treated were successfully released back into the wild. Nearly one-fifth have been placed into educational and captive breeding programs throughout the country. As I researched this topic, I was given medical records and reports from the three centers. I was amazed to see the number of gunshot and trap victims. That is one reason why raptor centers must educate people about raptors and their importance in nature. Ecologically we may not be making a difference, but we can increase public awareness.

If you are interested in becoming a raptor center volunteer or member in Alaska, please contact:

Bird TLC, 1142 H Street, Anchorage, AK 99501, (907) 274-1186

Alaska Raptor Rehabilitation Center P.O. 2984, Sitka, AK 99835, (907)747-8662

Juneau Raptor Center, P.O. Box 34713, Juneau, AK 99803

Basic handling of eagles for rescue and shipment to raptor center

An eagle appears to be suffering from an injury

1. If there is a local raptor center in the area call them. One can reach the Juneau Raptor Center by calling the state troopers, police department, or local veterinarians.
2. It is important that you also look around the area where you find the bird for clues to what happened to it. For example, are there nearby power lines?
3. Try to work in a team if possible.
4. It's best that your hands and arms are protected from its talons and beak. Now is the time to put on leather gloves and a thick jacket if you have them.

5. Approach eagle with blanket or some large fabric (coats have many times been used).
6. Drape blanket over eagle making sure the head is covered.
7. Holding wings in with elbows, scoop eagle into chest.
8. Have someone assist in the location of legs and talons.
9. Once they locate a foot, grab on to it so that you are holding one in each hand.
10. Eagles can be shipped to the centers in a pet kennel or large box. Most local airlines have kennels available. Alaska Airlines and charter services will fly birds to the facilities.

Literature Cited

Schempf, P. F. 1996. Bald Eagle longevity record from Southeastern Alaska. *J. Field Ornithol.* 68(1):150-151.