



2019 Eagle Burial Ceremony

Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, Colorado – A newly established burial site nestled between two trees on a section of restored prairie will ensure that eagle remains from the National Eagle Repository (Repository) will have an appropriate final resting place. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) invited Tribes with a historical, ancestral connection to this area to help inaugurate this burial site by blessing it and the interred eagle remains in their Tribe's traditional ways.

On October 25th, 2019 Service employees and Tribal representatives from the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, Oglala Lakota, and Southern Ute participated in a blessing ceremony of the new eagle burial site on the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge. This burial site is the first of its kind for the Service, and demonstrates the Service's commitment to respect and value the cultural, spiritual, and traditional practices of Tribes.

In 2017, the Service conducted a national consultation with Federally Recognized Tribes on topics involving the Repository and eagle possession. During that consultation and subsequent discussions, some Tribal leaders indicated that the Repository's current method of disposing unusable eagle parts and feathers was not appropriate. They suggested that a more appropriate method for final placement of these sacred items was burial.

Service employees from the Denver Regional Office, Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, and National Eagle Repository collaborated to make the Tribe's request for an eagle burial site a reality. The Repository receives approximately 3,300 eagles per year, and although they strive to send out all usable parts to Tribal applicants, the amount of unusable eagle remains is significant. A burial site had to be large enough to accommodate the cremated eagle remains, and close enough to the Repository to be logistically feasible. The refuge was the perfect choice. Away from public access, the site is tranquil, save an occasional deer or bison that stops to forage nearby. In the distance, the Rocky Mountains provide an impressive backdrop where blue sky stretches over the length of the Denver Front Range.



Photo: Golden eagle by USFWS

It was here that the Oglala Lakota, Cheyenne and Arapaho, and Southern Ute Representatives blessed the site and returned the eagle remains back to the Earth. Service staff were also present and were honored to witness such a historic event. The prayer songs and other ceremonial traditions were truly a spiritual, emotional, and memorable moment for all present. At one point in the ceremony, a pair of bald eagles flew over the gathering and circled the site, as if to acknowledge the significance of the site and to pay their respects to the eagles interred there. At the end of the ceremony, five eagles could be seen flying in the distance. Much thanks goes out to our Tribal guests for making their long journey and conducting the ceremonies necessary to inaugurate this burial site, without their participation this could not have been successful.



Photo: Tribal participants and the Service discuss the burial site and upcoming blessing ceremony



Photo: Tribal representatives and Service staff

Top Left: Garth Spellman (Denver Museum of Nature and Science); Steve Oberholtzer (USFWS); Cora White Horse (Oglala Lakota); President Julian Bear Runner (Oglala Lakota); Gilbert Miles (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, Lt. Governor); Reggie Wassana (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, Governor); Chris Yellow Eagle (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, Special Project Director); Ricky Gray Grass (Oglala Lakota, Spiritual Leader); Matt Hogan (USFWS); Doni Sprague (USFWS); Bryan Sanchez-Rodriguez; Hanley E. Frost Sr (Southern Ute Tribe, Cultural Coordinator); Adam Shepard (USFWS)

Bottom left: William Plentyarrows (Oglala Lakota); Wakinyon Little Moon (Oglala Lakota); Lewis Tall Bull Jr. (Southern Cheyenne, Oglala Lakota); Scott Aikin (USFWS); Melissa Castiano (USFWS); Anna Munoz (USFWS); James Hollman (USFWS); Sarah Metzger (USFWS); Elisa Dahlberg (USFWS); Hanley E. Frost's grandson (Southern Ute); Laura Mallory (USFWS)

