National Eagle Repository Guidelines for Necropsy on Eagles October 2026

Background

Performing minimally invasive necropsies on deceased eagles can yield valuable scientific data while preserving the quality and quantity of remains that NER can provide to Tribal applicants for spiritual and religious use.

The National Eagle Repository (NER) receives the remains of deceased adult and immature bald and golden eagle and distributes the remains, parts, and feathers to enrolled members of federally recognized Native American Tribes. Federal, Tribal, state, and local government offices, permitted wildlife rehabilitators, authorized public entities like public zoological parks, and members of the public are required by law to submit the remains of deceased eagles to NER, including remains that have been necropsied.

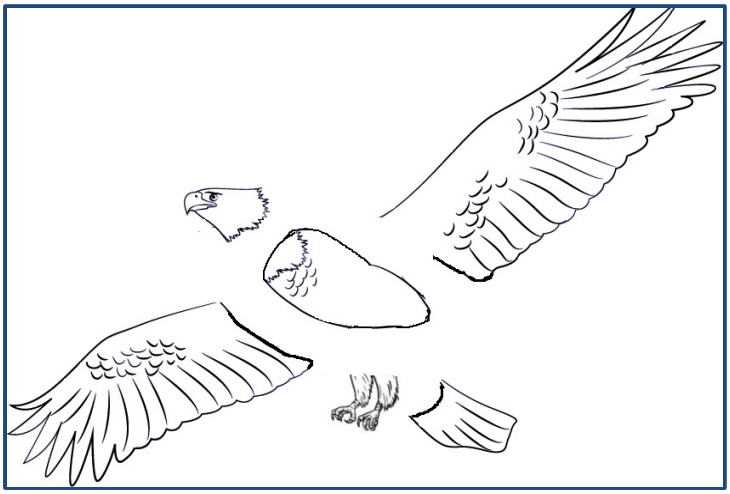

Figure 1: typical cuts made to eagle remains by NER

Depending upon the condition of remains upon receipt, NER may keep remains whole or may salvage loose feathers or parts for distribution, including wings, tails, torsos, heads, and feet. Demand in some order categories greatly exceeds supply, particularly for whole birds, as remains frequently arrive with significant decomposition or damage. Extensive damage from necropsy renders certain parts unusable and prevents NER from distributing those remains as whole. NER receives far fewer deceased golden eagles than bald eagles, leading to longer wait times for golden eagles, parts, and feathers.

Determining Appropriate Necropsy Methods

NER accepts the remains of all deceased bald and golden eagles. This includes the remains of eagles that have been euthanized (including with pentobarbital), with high concentrations of lead, or that have not been tested for HPAI. **Eagle remains should not be necropsied unless absolutely necessary and authorized under a federal permit.** If a necropsy is necessary, the least invasive methods possible must be used. Eagles associated with active law enforcement investigations may be given a full necropsy as required by the investigation.

NER **does not** accept remains meeting the following criteria (these remains may be given a full necropsy):

- Nestlings or fledglings (eagles with ten or more flight feathers still blood quills).
- Eagles without an intact beak, trachea, and cloaca prior to necropsy.
- Eagles known to be positive for Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI), West Nile Virus, or Eastern Equine Encephalitis prior to necropsy.
- Eagles known to have died from the consumption of anticoagulant rodenticides or of aspergillosis.

Minimizing Damage to Necropsied Eagle Remains

You must have a federal eagle scientific permit (50 CFR 22.50) or other federal authorization to necropsy an eagle. When conducting a necropsy, please implement the following to minimize damage to eagle remains to the maximum extent possible:

- For golden eagle remains, use particular care and consideration when performing necropsies. NER receives only a small number of deceased golden eagles each year; using minimally invasive necropsy techniques helps preserve the condition of these remains for distribution.
- Do not perform destructive sampling methods.
- Do not amputate or sever appendages.
- If testing for HPAI, collect test samples prior to performing the necropsy. If not testing for HPAI, do not sever or significantly damage the beak, trachea or cloaca. These parts must be intact for the collection of HPAI test samples by NER.
- Make the smallest number of incisions possible and make these incisions the minimum necessary length.
- Remove organs, brains and eyes only if absolutely required for diagnosis.
- Avoid damaging or removing ulna bones. Ulna bones are frequently used by Tribal members.
- Avoid damaging or removing leg bones below the femur. NER distributes eagle feet to Tribal applicants.
- Do not break or trim beaks or talons.
- Avoid removing tail, primary or secondary feathers when possible unless broken or significantly damaged. Select wing feathers beyond S14 or S15 when possible.
- Do not break, bend, or tie packaging materials around flight feathers.
- Remove all medical devices and equipment, such as scalpels, gloves, needles, and clamping scissors before packaging remains.
- Dispose of any removed viscera or bones and any organs that cannot be contained in the chest cavity prior to shipment to NER to prevent further decay.
- Use absorbent materials during necropsy to minimize damage to the remains and feathers from blood and other bodily fluids. Pack the chest cavity with absorbent material prior to shipment to NER.

Learn more about shipping eagle remains to the National Eagle Repository here.

Contacting NER

For assistance determining whether and/or how an eagle should be necropsied or for general questions, please call (303) 287 2110 or email repository@fws.gov.

Other Resources

- The National Eagle Repository
- The Eagle Handling and Distribution Handbook for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Personnel
- The Clark R. Bavin National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory
- 50 CFR Part 22: Eagle Permits

The Importance of Our Collaborative Work

By following these guidelines, you are helping to improve the quality of services and materials provided to Native American Tribal members and nations.