

Helping one sick eagle: A difficult and risky task?

by Ted Bailey

Ever wonder what happens after you report a sick or injured bald eagle to a wildlife agency on the upper Kenai Peninsula? Regardless of who you reported it to, someone at the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, and then at the Richard's Veterinary Clinic will likely respond to the call. It's a federal job, because bald eagles and other migratory birds that regularly fly across state boundaries need the broad protection of federal laws.

A few weeks ago we received a typical call about a sick eagle at the Borough landfill in Soldotna. Because of their scavenging lifestyle, eagles are attracted to the landfill where they not only find human food but also expose themselves to a variety of health risks. We have made numerous trips to the landfill to respond to sick or injured birds. As often happens, it was on a Saturday afternoon. Reports of injured bald eagles occur mainly on weekends, evenings, or holidays, because more people are outdoors at these times. We receive few sick eagle calls during normal business hours on weekdays.

Wildlife biologist Rick Ernst responded to this particular call during his weekend off; he retrieved the lethargic eagle, and took it to Richard's Veterinary Clinic. There, in the evening hours after the Clinic was closed, veterinarian Dr. Bart Richards examined the eagle, cleaned off an unknown repulsive-smelling residue, and held the bird overnight. During handling, the eagle regurgitated a large chunk of animal remains and slowly began to improve. We will send off the remains for analysis because we suspect some form of poisoning.

By Sunday the eagle had recovered enough to be moved from the Clinic, but Rick Ernst was leaving on a trip and asked me to take over. I told the Clinic that I would retrieve the eagle and hold it in our eagle flight pen for observation before releasing it. In the meantime I searched through our home freezer for some salmon to thaw out for the eagle.

Handling a mature bald eagle is not without its risks, because their sharp talons and strong beaks are formidable and fast-moving weapons. Although Dr. Richards has handled numerous eagles under similar circumstances, this particular eagle managed to

twist and bite his hand before we transferred it into a portable kennel. Such bites are not only painful; they can be potentially serious. We did not know the cause of the bird's illness, nor did we know what human-related disease agents it might have picked up in the landfill.

Back at the Refuge, after a trek through deep snow, I discovered that our eagle flight pen was unusable because the heavy winter snow had collapsed the fishnet roof and sides of the pen. I then took the eagle to a smaller steel cage in our lab at Refuge headquarters. The bird was comfortable there, but for the next two days it refused to eat anything. We dangled salmon in front of its beak and left salmon in the cage, but it never touched it.

I was concerned that food deprivation and dehydration might weaken the eagle if we did not feed and release it soon. With this in mind, I and two staff members, Stephanie Rickabaugh and Bob Schulmeister, set about to force feed the eagle some salmon on Tuesday morning. I reached into the cage with a net, and grabbed the legs to immobilize the talons. Bob held the wings and head, and Stephanie used lab tongs to gently force bite-sized pieces of salmon down the gullet until it had no option but to swallow. During this process, the eagle managed to twist and bite yet another hand. After force feeding, we put it back into the portable kennel, and Stephanie released it on the Refuge far from the landfill. She reported that it promptly took off, perched temporarily in a nearby tree, then took off again, circled high and disappeared over the horizon.

So, here are the benefits and costs of one report of a sick eagle: on the benefit side, we have one bald eagle recovered and released back into the wild. On the cost side, we are down some salmon from a personal food supply, we had unexpected telephone calls during a weekend that required changed personal plans for two refuge wildlife biologists and a veterinarian. And we have two people dedicated to wildlife conservation with bite wounds, wondering and hoping that the eagle has not inadvertently passed on to them something dreadful.

The Refuge's response to calls of injured or sick bald eagles may vary, but this case is not atypical, ex-

cept perhaps for the bites. Most eagles do not bite when handled, but they can be nasty with their talons. Handling any live bald eagle is not done without some risk. Furthermore, we have to coordinate responses to sick or injured wildlife with other Refuge activities, and we aren't always able to drop everything else in order to respond to an injured wildlife call. Richard's Veterinary Clinic has volunteered for the Refuge for over 15 years, without charge, to help sick and injured

bald eagles and other birds and wildlife on the Kenai Peninsula. This has been an outstanding contribution, and all friends of wildlife owe them a vote of thanks!

Ted Bailey, a supervisory wildlife biologist, has been responsible for the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge's biological programs for over 20 years. He and his staff monitor and conduct studies on a variety of refuge wildlife populations. Previous Refuge Notebook columns can be viewed at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.