

[An Eagle's Cry](#) - A personal look at the emotional side of wildlife rehabilitation.

by Louise Shimmel

I lost my first eagle this weekend. He died in my arms as we prepared to euthanize him, his breathing having suddenly gone from difficult to agonizing. He was the first eagle I had received in over two years and the first one who died. His presence received songs and blessings from Native Americans here and in California, as did his passing. His death brings back all my tears, too, at the loss four years ago of Icarus, a golden eagle who shared his life with me for nearly two years.

Eagles are very special birds, with a simple presence that I have to admire. They permit no liberties (and their feet can move like lightening) but know how to give in to superior strength, at least temporarily - unlike the little owls, who puff up, complain, and attack my hand no matter how carefully and slowly I move to clean their cages. Eagles don't throw themselves around in panic, like many of the hawks, making a trying time even more difficult; they don't scream like barn owls or falcons, trying to make me let go by pure, deafening sound. I am not saying eagles are meek, by any means, they will certainly do their best not to get caught, but once they are, they seem to know the wisdom of surrender, biding their time for a loosening of the grip.

Eagles are very significant birds for me; they come to me in inscrutable visions, they let me borrow their wings when my fear of flying threatens to engulf me during a rough flight or landing; their power and majesty epitomizes what draws me to raptors and my work with them. Those that I have had the honor of releasing have provided me with a strength of spirit to keep going through the many other birds I cannot return. The most frustrating thing as I listened to this majestic bird struggle for breath was not knowing what was wrong.

He had been brought in from Florence by the Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife: a fully adult bald eagle, very thin, with a number of serious lacerations and puncture wounds around the head, including one in the roof of his mouth. Our only guess as to cause was that he'd gotten a fishhook lodged in his mouth and had done the rest of the damage himself in trying to remove the hook. Subsequent infection had weakened him; weakness kept him from successfully hunting; more weakness followed. He had finally flown into a poultry pen, caught a domestic duck, and been too weak to fly out.

The respiratory problems didn't start until four days later, after his first x-rays, anesthesia, and surgical cleaning of his wounds. We had cultured the bacteria growing in the cut in his mouth and were treating it with appropriate antibiotics. We x-rayed both his head and full body, and did the blood test for aspergillosis - everything came back negative. But on necropsy there were the aspergillus plaques throughout his sinuses, lungs, and air sacs. Aspergillosis is a bogey-person in this business: a ubiquitous fungus whose spores we all breathe on a daily basis; that festers in damp conditions; that is really only dangerous when inhaled in large quantities all at once and/or when you are immuno-suppressed. (People can get it, too.) A starving, weak eagle

is immuno-suppressed, especially adding in the stress of captivity. Looking at the decreasing white blood cell counts taken over his two weeks in care show that his body was probably giving up the fight against a combined bacterial and fungal invasion, although they could also have been interpreted as a successful antibiotic fight against the bacterial infection.

Unfortunately, by the time you see clinical signs of the respiratory distress caused by aspergillosis it is often too late to fight it successfully - and the fight itself is highly stressful and debilitating, chemo-therapy with intense intravenous and intra-tracheal drugs. But at least there is a chance.

Underneath my grieving for this spectacular bird, I feel angry because we might have saved him if we'd received a positive diagnosis from the lab test or if the plaques had shown up at all on the radiographs. I feel helpless because the only other diagnostic tool we could have used we didn't have - an endoscope which would have let us look directly into the air sacs and up into the sinuses. I feel guilty because I dismissed my recurring thought it might be aspergillosis, because I sometimes think I see asper everywhere, and because I didn't want to have to further stress him by additional medications and handling. I feel incredibly sad and frustrated that all my years of experience, all the dedicated contributions of our excellent vet, weren't enough to save this bird.

At times like this, I am guilty of wondering why in the world I do this work and put myself through this pain. It's so easy to get bound up in the grief and "if only's" of losing a nestling red-tail hawk to blood and other parasites, despite a blood transfusion and 10 days of intense nursing; the agony of watching immature birds die because they were so weak by the time they let themselves get caught that the starvation, anemia, and other damage is irreversible and simply the stress of treatment can send them over the edge. At times like this it is hard to remember the successes, the joy of watching four other eagles soar free, the babies we do get to watch grow up and go. My best therapy is knowing that this bird is free, at least in spirit, and at peace - and that his feathers, bones, and feet will be used by Native Americans in their religious practices. Perhaps I will release five young kestrels to celebrate the Fourth of July; and the nine remaining barn owls will surely be ready this week. And on this day of Independence and freedom, perhaps I will simply sit outside in our new hillside aerie and watch the wild birds, squirrels and chipmunks, the twin fawns bounding across the lawn - and hope for the bald eagle who welcomed us here in February to fly overhead with a message of forgiveness.

The essay above was written on July 4th, 1994, as a personal release for some of the intense feelings that this work often engenders. I've never published it because I wasn't sure people would want to read it - and I like to keep our newsletter upbeat. However, since then I have lost 3 other bald eagles, one just over a month ago. One died due to aspergillosis complications and two because of peritonitis resulting from internal injuries caused by car collisions. All of these birds might have been saved if we had had access to an endoscope and could have diagnosed the problem early enough to correct it surgically or through treatments. An endoscope and reconditioned anesthetic machine, however, would cost in the neighborhood of \$9000.

Although I don't usually muddy the waters of our annual newsletter with a direct plea for funds, I would like to make an exception this year, in case there are readers out there able to make a very generous one-time gift dedicated to this use, to help all of the birds entrusted to our care. The anesthetic machine necessary for use with the endoscope would also enable us to do a number of treatments in-house for which we currently need to transport birds to a veterinary clinic, such as debriding a painful wound or suturing.

After publishing this article in our 1994 newsletter, we did receive from a generous donor the funds for the purchase of these two critical pieces of medical equipment. We are deeply grateful every time we use them. There are, however, always other pressing needs for which we appreciate dedicated donations: such as \$5,000 for an automatic x-ray developer plus \$1,000 for minor building renovations to allow its installation. Please see our Wish List for other projects.