



Original radiograph shows eagle's injuries Post-surgery radiograph

CROW Case Of The Week:

Bald Eagle

by Emilie Alfino

Not surprisingly, there was a lot of attention paid in March when a bald eagle came to CROW from Lehigh Acres with a shotgun wound. The eagle's prognosis was questionable to put it mildly and although he had a remarkably successful course of treatment and a triumphant recovery, not much attention was paid when he was released back to his home in the wild on June 12.

The adult bald eagle was found in Lehigh by Felicia Mercer, who had seen him on the ground in her neighborhood. "The first time I saw him he was a couple of houses down from mine in the road," Mercer said. "I was thinking, 'Is that really an eagle?' I couldn't believe how big and how tall it was, and when the eagle spread its wings how far they went across."

Over the next three days, the eagle made its way almost to Mercer's front door near one of her vehicles, where he stayed for quite some time. Then the bird tried to walk off and that's when Mercer realized it was injured. "He was headed for a wooded area and was struggling across the street. I couldn't see any injuries before that," Mercer said. "The only time I did was when the bird was walking off and when he was trying to fly and couldn't. He just kept tipping forward."

While Mercer was unfamiliar with CROW, she turned to the telephone book and looked under "animal rescue" and was referred to the Sanibel clinic. A volunteer came out and captured the eagle for transport to CROW. "It was just calm," Mercer reported, "sitting and looking around."

He came to CROW on March 6 thin, dehydrated, with a lot of swelling around the left elbow, and both the radius and ulna in his left wing were fractured, according to Dr. Amber McNamara. "We could feel those fractures. What we didn't know until we

took a radiograph was how much buckshot there was everywhere throughout his whole body," she said.

Who would shoot a bald eagle, not only a bird just recently removed from the endangered and threatened species list, but the symbol of our country? "As far as I know, they never found out who did it," Dr. Amber said. "We're required by law to report any intentional injury to any protected bird, not just those that are threatened or endangered. Most wild birds fall under this category." The investigation was handled by Fish & Wildlife from that point forward.

The eagle was very dull and quiet and obviously didn't feel very well when he arrived at CROW. "That first day we gave him some pain medication, cleaned up a couple of wounds near that fracture and bandaged those, and put the wing in a wrap to keep the fracture from getting any worse," Dr. Amber explained. "We gave him some fluids because of his dehydration."

The eagle didn't resist the ministrations. "Most of the time with the raptors when you put a hood over their heads they're more agreeable, and he was so dull - which was not a good sign for him," she said.

Because this eagle had so much swelling around the elbow, she elected to wait about three days to do surgery. When she finally did, he was put under anesthesia and Dr. Amber was able to put a pin inside the radius, drawing the ulna into better alignment. "I was pleased with how that came together," she said. "We put a wrap on after surgery to keep that wing immobilized. He came through the anesthesia beautifully by that afternoon and ate the next morning readily, and you can't ask for much more than that."



Eagle waking up from surgery



Eagle in large flight cage



The eagle being released near its home base in Lehigh Acres

The eagle was anesthetized again at the 48-hour mark to check the pin, and everything looked great. "At that point we were able to put his pain medication in fish since eagles tend to eat them whole, and put him in our large doublewide cage where we were able to shift him from one side to the other to clean his cage without handling him much.

Much of the buckshot was left in the bird. "If we had gone searching for it, we really would have torn up the soft tissue," Dr. Amber explained. "When I was doing surgery, if I had run into any I would have taken it out but I didn't go digging for it."

The eagle was put under anesthesia one more time one week later to change the wrap and to start for the first time to do some stretching of the wing so the tendon didn't get too tight, and I was happy with the way it looked at that point," she said.

The wrap was removed on the 23rd day, then staff did some stretching exercises and kept the bird inside another week and a half. "So he was inside for about four weeks, which is a lot to ask of a large bird, but he was very cooperative," said Dr. Amber. "Still, he was starting to let us know he was ready for more space."

Dr. Amber removed the pin at the three-week mark with the eagle fully awake. "He hardly reacted to it at all," she said.

The eagle was moved to an enclosure that would allow him to stretch his wings yet not make him frantic to do more than he was ready to do. He stayed there for one and a half weeks before being moved to a small flight enclosure. "He needed to spend another four weeks in that enclosure and he was starting to do some really nice flapping and short flights," she said. "Once in a large flight enclosure, within two weeks he was flying the length of that cage, which is about 130 feet."

With the eagle flying well, staff wanted to make sure their patient had the stamina to fly in the wild. He soon passed that test and on June 12 he got to back to his home in Lehigh. People questioned why he would be sent back to the place where he was shot, but Dr. Amber explained that eagles are territorial enough that he needed to go home. "He may even have a mate there," she stressed.

"Everyone really did a wonderful job," she said. "This eagle had so much trauma we weren't sure at the beginning if this bird was even going to make it; it was wonderful to see him fly again. In his case, we knew the history of his injury – he had been shot and was lying on the ground for three days. That was really helpful determining his treatment. It's very hard that we so rarely know what happened to the animals we see for treatment. It's rare that we have a complete history. That makes it a challenge for sure."

One very happy person was Felicia Mercer, the eagle's rescuer, who had no idea the bird had been shot and was very excited to learn that he was released and able to fly again. "I can't believe it!" she said.

CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife, Inc.) is a non-profit wildlife hospital providing veterinary care for native and migratory wildlife from the Gulf Coast of Florida. The hospital accepts patients seven days a week from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. Mail donations to PO Box 150, Sanibel, FL 33957. Call 472-3644 or visit: www.crowclinic.org.