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34 Year-Old American Bald Eagle Cared for at Teton Raptor Center Succumbs to Injuries

April 22nd, 2016 - Over the last 72 hours, it became clear to Teton Raptor Center (TRC) that the severity of our 34 year-old American Bald Eagle's injuries would prevent her from returning to the wild and her quality of life was taking a downward turn. After consultation with our primary veterinarian, Dr. Heather Carleton, and other avian veterinarians from across the country, and in accordance with the regulations under which we serve injured raptors, we came to the conclusion that humane euthanasia was in the best interest of the patient. The primary goal of rehabilitation at TRC is to return injured, ill, and orphaned birds of prey back to the wild, but unfortunately, it was no longer an option for this patient. TRC does place non-releasable raptors in suitable education programs at times, but for this eagle, her wounds were too extensive to allow for comfortable mobility and a content life in captivity. The eagle was humanely euthanized at Teton Raptor Center on the afternoon of April 21st.

On March 12th, TRC's Executive Director, Amy McCarthy took a call from the Wyoming Game and Fish Department about an injured wild Bald Eagle in Jackson, WY. TRC staff members Becky Collier, Senior Avian Educator and Sarah Ramirez, Rehab Intern were conducting a training session with Resident Bald Eagle, River, when Amy shared the news. The three staff members gathered supplies and went to the rescue. The mature Bald Eagle was found on the ground near a residence on North Highway 89, across from the National Elk Refuge.

It took about two weeks for TRC to uncover the true nature of her trauma, which was suspected to have originated from a car strike. However, given the lack of healing and the discovery of an entry wound on her leg, the cause of her injuries was traced to electrification from contact with energized power lines. Eagles are physically large enough to inadvertently bridge the gap between two lines, making them particularly vulnerable to electrification. Upon the determination of electrification as the cause of injury, we immediately reached out to Lower Valley Energy (LVE). They responded swiftly and with keen attentiveness to retrofitting the area where the bird was rescued. LVE has an extensive Avian Protection Plan and works quickly to address problem areas to prevent further bird mortalities.

On April 20th, our primary veterinarian performed surgery to remove some of the necrotic tissue from the eagle's right wing. Wounds from electrification are devastating and at that time it was clear that the entire wing was compromised. We reached out to our community of avian veterinary advisors from across the country and through their counsel, it became clear that any chance of recovery was highly unlikely. "We feel all raptors deserve dignity in life, and if necessary, dignity in death. This Bald Eagle touched all who learned her story. While our hearts are heavy, our respect for the life of this magnificent animal will motivate us to move forward, doing all we can to educate the public about dangers threatening raptors and minimize their need for rehab," said Becky Collier, TRC Senior Avian Educator.

“This eagle’s story has reached thousands of people across the country and beyond. We are grateful to her followers for supporting her care through kind words, donations, and encouragement from afar,” said Meghan Warren, Rehabilitation Coordinator. “Although she will not return to the wild, her story will live on through TRC’s educational programs and through her contribution to the successful recovery of her species.”

This 34-year-old Bald Eagle is the third oldest wild member of her species ever documented. She hatched in Jackson Hole in 1982 and was fitted at that time with a permanent leg band for research purposes. For nearly three decades, she nested in Jackson and has been a major genetic contributor to her species. According to Susan Patla, Nongame Biologist at the Wyoming Game and Fish Department, nesting data indicates that she likely nested each spring for the last 28 years and probably produced 35-45 chicks in her lifetime. “The Bald Eagle recovery blossomed here in the South Jackson area. Offspring from Jackson Hole eagles are known to have nested throughout the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) and Idaho, Montana and the rest of Wyoming,” said Patla. “Her life symbolizes her species’ recovery. Her death symbolizes the dangers that Bald Eagles continue to face, not only in the GYE, but throughout the country.”

Bald eagle populations severely declined in the lower 48 states between 1870 and 1970 because of hunting, habitat loss and the use of DDT. It was not until June 2007 that the Bald Eagle was removed from the federal list of endangered and threatened species. In 1982, the year this bird hatched, the Bald Eagle population was estimated to be only 1,480 pairs in the lower 48 states. Now, the Bald Eagle population has soared beyond 70,000 pairs in North America.

“It is a privilege and a challenge to be engaged in the work of wildlife rehabilitation. TRC staff, volunteers and the staff at Jackson Animal Hospital provided over 248 hours of care throughout the course of her treatment. The heartbreak our team is experiencing is shared by a compassionate community of supporters. We feel this loss deeply, and we are heartened and inspired by all that we learned through the history, trials, and fortitude of this remarkable patient. This eagle has deepened our appreciation and wonder for the natural world. We will honor her by continuing to do all that we can to keep wild birds wild,” said Amy McCarthy, TRC’s Executive Director.

ABOUT TETON RAPTOR CENTER

Teton Raptor Center (TRC) is a nonprofit organization based in Jackson Hole, WY dedicated to advancing raptor conservation through education, research and rehabilitation. In 2015, TRC conducted 360 educational programs for 18,000 people and cared for 130 injured, ill or orphaned raptors at our rehabilitation clinic. TRC leads long-term research studies on a variety of raptor species and their prey, including Great Gray Owls, Golden Eagles, Greater Sage-Grouse and migratory songbirds. TRC is located at the historic Hardeman Ranch, a Jackson Hole Land Trust protected property in Wilson, Wyoming. If you find an injured raptor, please call the Injured Raptor Line: 307.200.6019.

For more information: 307.203.2551 or www.tetonraptorcenter.org.

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