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Free bird: Ellen Trout Zoo helps bald eagle back to health

By BRITTONY LUND
The Lufkin Daily News



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Between New Year's Eve and just two days before a new president took office, a bald eagle named Mike got a second chance at life thanks to the fast thinking of several city, state and federal agencies and a caring staff at Lufkin's Ellen Trout Zoo.

Mike, named after zoo veterinarian Michael Nance, found his way into the Nance's loving hands New Year's Eve after a local hunter discovered the bird in Angelina Forest. The man who found the bird contacted Texas Parks and Wildlife immediately, even though he had to go through a lot of legal issues in reporting his discovery.



(ENLARGE) Contributed photo
John Karger holds a bald eagle before flying it back to Last Chance Forever for continued medical care and rehabilitation.

"This gentleman cared enough for this bird to report it," Nance said.

Through a series of events Texas Parks and Wildlife discovered the closest bald eagle vet in Tyler could not take the bird that night and so, with her recommendation, they called Nance and asked if he could take care of it.

"It was such a special honor to get to work with our national bird," Nance said. "This guy was in our backyard. He's probably flown over Ellen Trout Zoo and looked down on us and he found a way here in his time of need."

At first glance Nance and Celia Falzone, the zoo's curator, thought the eagle's chances of survival seemed very small, especially since the zoo doesn't have all the equipment and technology to treat such an animal with such severe injuries. But the two immediately began to treat the bird, first putting it on an IV and then antibiotics and anti-inflammatory drugs.

"It was lethargic, weak and it wouldn't even attempt to fight back which is a bad sign," Nance said.

On further examination the two discovered several wounds but no bleeding. The eagle's right wing tip seemed the worst, so bad Nance and Falzone could clearly see the bird's tendons. A bad wound on the wing tip may never fully heal to where the bird can fly well enough again.

"This could limit the possibility of him being released," Falzone said. "We don't know what the future holds for him yet."

After treating the wounds the zoo contacted state and federal agencies responsible for helping bald eagles get the best treatment. Working with these agencies, Mike's fate began to look brighter. The agencies contacted John Karger, executive director of Last Chance Forever, a nonprofit organization in San Antonio dedicated to the rehabilitation of sick, injured or orphaned birds of prey. Karger, a master falconer and veterinary technician, takes in between 150 and 300 of these birds each year. The organization estimates between 65 to 80 percent eventually fly in the wild again. Karger finds good homes for the rest that can't be released.

As the staff nursed Mike back to stability Karger made plans to fly to Lufkin and pick up the bird. On Sunday, two days before Barack Obama's inauguration, this national bird that symbolizes America's strength and nobility, made its way home with Karger with the hope of healing and a better future.

"This is such a huge success story," Falzone said. "We don't know the ultimate fate of the bird but we do know it'll have a life."

Nance and Falzone hope to see the eagle again one day after its release.

"He has pizzaz," Nance said. "He was a cool bird. Still is. Nothing would be greater than to watch him fly over East Texas again."

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Zoo staff encourages anyone who finds a wild animal to leave it alone. They should call Texas Parks and Wildlife to let them find the best way to take care of the animal. Zoo director Gordon Henley stressed this especially with baby animals. He said many people will find a baby deer left alone and want to help it but though their intentions are good they actually end up hurting the animal.

"Many times an animal is not abandoned," Henley said. "Parents will leave the baby deer in hiding somewhere but the adult will not come back while a person is standing there. Have faith in that deer's mommy to come back when people leave."

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