

June 20, 2004

Bald eagle chicks take historic flights

ADDISON – The first bald eagle chick to fledge in Vermont in at least 50 years lifted off from her manmade perch Friday morning, June 18, and immediately took a self-guided tour of the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area in Addison.

“I’m impressed,” said Craig Newman, an Outreach for Earth Stewardship board member and part of a team that opened the two birds’ temporary home at 4:32 a.m., as a coyote howled in the distance. “I was thinking there’d be more of a downward path. That was incredible!”

The bird, one of two eaglets captured in the wild in Maryland and placed in a hack box at Dead Creek in early May, made a steady climb in her first flight at 6:49 a.m., banking around nearby trees and heading south and out of sight. The bird reappeared 24 minutes later, roughly following Dead Creek north and crossing Route 17.

“Unbelievable; absolutely amazing,” said Steve Costello from Central Vermont Public Service, another member of the team that opened the hack box. “She looks like she’s been flying forever.”

The four volunteers, including Newman, Costello, Richard Piliero and Rex Meader, met at 3 a.m. to disconnect and lower the front panel of the birds’ hack box, a semi-enclosed structure used for raising birds of prey for release. The work was done just before the earliest rays of the morning sun began to light up the eastern sky.

The two birds quickly flew to an 8-foot-wide perch inside their hack box, but it was more than two hours before the older of the two birds, about 14 weeks old, took off.

The second bird, two weeks younger, finally took off mid-afternoon, landing just below the hack box. It subsequently got its wings under itself and flew away from the site under the watchful eye of program coordinator Eveleen Cecchini.

The two birds, and six younger bald eaglets brought from Massachusetts and Maine, are the focus of the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative, a collaborative effort to restore a breeding bald eagle population to Vermont. The six younger birds will be freed once all of their flight feathers come in. The partnership includes OFES, the National Wildlife Federation, Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, and CVPS. Funding for the project was obtained through the efforts of Sen. James Jeffords.

Vermont, the only state in the continental United States that lacks a breeding bald eagle population, hasn’t hosted a successful nest since 1948.

The project partners not only hope to restore bald eagles to Vermont, but to educate Vermonters about bald eagles, other raptors, and the role they play in our ecosystem. The project website, www.cvps.com/eagles, includes information on project goals and methods, bald eagles, and two live eaglecams.

One eaglecam focuses on a hack box that contains three eaglets. The other camera is in the now-open box. Once it is clear the birds are out of that box for good, that camera will be moved to the third hack box, which also houses three birds.

“The worrying is done,” said Cecchini, director of OFES, after the first bird flew away. “She can take care of herself now!”