

Volunteers open door to bald eagles' first flights

Editor's note: This is the second, and final, part of a diary detailing first the capture in Maryland and transport of eaglet chicks to Vermont, and today the release of three birds into the wild.

By Steve Costello

ADDISON – Heavy clouds obscure the moon as five volunteers and three members of the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative team march through waist-high grass in the dark, intent on opening a new world to three eagle chicks.

The birds, captured from nests in Maryland by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, have spent the past five weeks in a tower-top cage at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area, where volunteers have fed them salmon, perch, carp, moose and venison in an effort to restore the national symbol to Vermont's skies. Vermont is the only state in the lower 48 that lacks breeding bald eagles, but the octet, part of the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative, aim to change that in the next few years.

The collaborative effort, including USF&W, the Vermont Department of Fish & Wildlife, Outreach for Earth Stewardship, the National Wildlife Federation and Central Vermont Public Service, with funding secured by Sen. James Jeffords, have released 19 eagles over the past two summers. At 3 a.m. Monday, we set out through the wet grass to release numbers 20, 21, and 22.

Sean Palmer, who has camped out at Dead Creek to keep an eye on the birds each night, and volunteer Rex Meader climb an aluminum ladder to the eagle tower's "porch," a simple deck that fronts three 8-foot-square cages 20 feet above the ground. In minutes they've removed the front door of Box 1, lowering it to helpers below, who store it underneath the tower while Palmer and Meader descend. Bald eagles don't see much better than humans in the dark, so the process must be done at night.

In the first year of the project, it took over an hour to remove the door and retreat a safe distance, but on Monday, after two years of practice and improvements to the process, it takes barely 10 minutes. By 3:45 a.m. we're heading across a small dam to a blind set up several hundred yards from the tower so we can watch the trio of birds make their maiden flights. We're in for a bit of a wait.

The still air is quiet at first, swarms of mosquitoes providing the only steady sound until a sudden rain shower begins drumming on the roof of the shelter, which is built less than a foot from a drainage ditch filled 8 inches deep with dirty water.

"It's kind of nice that the blind is set up next to a mosquito breeding site," Palmer quips to its builder, Amy Alfieri, the first of many good-natured jokes that go back and forth between members of the small group.

"Great fledging weather," says Alfieri, a Fish & Wildlife employee who has coordinated dozens of volunteers throughout the spring.

"They may never leave," I joke as we all crowd inside the 8-by-4-foot blind, where chairs, a bench, binoculars and miscellaneous equipment force us to practically sit one atop the other.

"It reminds me of a rain delay in Little League," I say to laughter. "I was just thinking the same thing," says volunteer Bob Rathbun, a retired dairy farmer from Shoreham. That reminds me of a joke my 10-year-old nephew and I ritually tell each other every time we talk.

"These two cows are in a field," I tell the group, "and one looks at the other and says 'Mooooooo.' 'That's so weird,' says the other cow. 'I was just going to say that.'" Everyone's obviously bored or exhausted: They laugh heartily.

By 5 a.m., dim light to the east begins to expose the tower, and three stout birds can be clearly seen through binoculars and scopes, sitting as if at attention on a perch at the front of their doorless cage. The

countdown is on. It's barely becoming light out, but within a few minutes, one of the birds begins exercising its wings, and the anticipation is growing.

Like babies about to attempt their first steps, or youngsters about to lose their training wheels, the birds will soon venture into unknown territory, with no parents, and no net.

A pair of Canada geese swoops down over the pond in front of the tower, their wings in perfect rhythm as they pass before the eagles, a flight path that might be fatal if the eaglets were seasoned flyers.

"Take a lesson guys," I say, as if the eagles can hear me. "Take a hint," volunteer Francine O'Brien says.

Whether goose-inspired or not, one bird earns his wings moments later, hopping from the perch and cutting a 100-yard arc to a pine tree to the south.

"That was an impressive first flight," Alfieri says. "He was ready."

Birds 21 and 22 are not ready, at least not yet. After the excitement of the first fledging, we continue to watch the tower for any signs of flight, but the eagles are in no hurry. Fortunately, the rest of the refuge's wildlife puts on a show.

A pair of killdeer march through a plowed field, squealing their name: "Kill-deer! Kill-deer." The birds often feign injury to lure predators away from their nest, but in this case they appear to simply be out for a stroll.

A muskrat swims through a nearby pond, while two deer – one with a nearly white body – forage among the grasses on the opposite side of the water. A blue heron also plies its trade, working the shoreline for small fish or frogs.

The most entertaining wildlife sideshow features a two-species performance, an osprey and a male red-winged blackbird. The smaller bird repeatedly lands on the osprey's platform, sometimes right in its nest.

Ospreys' diets are 99 percent fish, so the blackbird isn't at much risk of being eaten, and he seems to know it. The bird spends more than an hour in close quarters with the fish hawk, which dwarfs him but for the most part ignores him.

"The osprey seems oblivious," Palmer says as the blackbird walks about on the edge of the nest platform. "I think he's laughing at the osprey."

Daylight is in full force by the time the second eagle decides it's time to become a fledgling. The bird flaps its wings for a couple of minutes while keeping a good grasp on his perch, then lifts off for a 50-yard flight, leaving bird 22 alone.

That prompts a lot of debate over his intentions. Is he going to fledge today? Is he going to sit for days?

Alfieri, one of the two more experienced birders on hand, weighs in with an authoritative voice.

"I don't think he's going to go today," she says assuredly.

Seconds pass. "He might or he might not," she says.

"Is that your scientific evaluation?" Rathbun asks, and we all burst into laughter again.

Palmer, who put a pile of salmon chunks into the birds' cage the night before, figures the last bird may sit tight.

“Now he’s got 6 pounds of salmon he doesn’t have to share,” Palmer says.

Salmon or no salmon, the third bird looks like he wants to go, even if he can’t screw up the courage, or whatever it is that makes eagles throw themselves from their nests the first time they fly.

Two hours after the second bird fledged, the third eagle is still sitting on his perch – though he’s moved from one end to the other. Suddenly, the bird jumps from the perch – but lands just a few feet away on the tower’s front decking. Thus begins a final fledging performance that will last nearly an hour.

The bird hops, jumps and flies a few feet at a time, from one end of the porch to the other, up to the perch, down to a lower perch, and back again. Thirty-five minutes after the bird leaves its perch for the first time, I have to leave for work. Fifteen minutes later, the bird follows in the wing flaps of its roommates and flies free for the first time.

Three birds. Three successful fledglings. Three small victories in the battle to remove the bald eagle from Vermont’s endangered species list.

Steve Costello is director of public affairs at Central Vermont Public Service and a member of the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative team. Several younger bald eagle chicks remain in the Dead Creek tower, and can be seen via webcam on the project’s website, www.cvps.com/eagles.