



Mike Allen

# Eagle Aid

by Elaine Bloom

*Sometimes DEC wildlife technician Mike Allen looks out his window at the spacious cages that have, over the years, housed at least eight recuperating bald eagles, and thinks, “Gosh, I’ve got bald eagles in my backyard, for crying out loud!”*

The idea still astounds him because, 33 years ago when Mike began his professional career, there wasn’t much need to house sick and injured bald eagles. Why? Because there were few eagles left in New York State. But thanks to a ban on DDT, habitat protection, and a program raising and releasing young eagles, New York’s eagle population has rebounded and is now reproducing on its own. In 2008, 145 mated pairs of bald eagles nested here and 573 eagles were counted during the annual mid-winter

survey. Each year, a few of these birds need help, and that’s where Mike’s “halfway house” for eagles comes in.

One of Mike’s recent patients came to him by way of Jamestown, N.Y. veterinarian Bill Seleen. Brought to Dr. Seleen’s clinic in June 2008 by DEC wildlife staffers Dan Dougherty and Bob Lichorat, the eagle had a mangled foot and an infection raging through her emaciated body. A tattered wing tag proved her to be a 21-year-old veteran of Ontario,

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Canada’s early bald eagle restoration program, released as a fledgling in 1987 and not seen since.

The bird, captured after a week of persistent effort, was too thin and weak to fly. According to Dr. Seleen, it was apparent from her condition that she’d been struggling to survive for some time.

When the veterinarian examined her right foot, he found that several toes were fractured and the hallux talon—the one that faces backward, securing the eagle’s grip on perch or prey—had been ripped off entirely. The wound had formed a mass the size of a golf ball. Dr. Seleen knew that healing a severe injury like that would be a challenge because of the hard, scaly skin on an eagle’s foot.

At between 8 and 14 pounds, with a wing span up to 7 feet, a hooked beak and 2-inch-long talons that can exert a force of 1,000 pounds of pressure per square inch, an upset bald eagle can be formidable. But Dr. Seleen was impressed

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with this bird’s calm demeanor. “She was one of the tamest birds I’ve had,” said the veterinarian, who has treated several bald eagles and countless other wildlife at his clinic.

The eagle turned out to be a good patient, although clinic staff always took care to wrap those lethal talons, sharp beak and powerful wings in a blanket during examinations,

antibiotic injections and force feeding. Dr. Seleen opted to pass up surgery on the deformed foot, not wanting to risk making it worse.

After the wound had mostly healed, the infection gone, and her weight up from 7 to 12 pounds (normal for a female eagle), the veterinarian deemed the eagle healthy enough to leave his clinic, although no one knew when, if ever, she would return to the wild. Was she strong enough to fly? Could she learn to land and balance on a branch using what was left of the maimed foot? Would she be able to feed herself?

There was never any doubt that the best place to find the answers to these questions was in one of the 12-by-12-by-8-foot high flight cages in Mike Allen’s backyard.

Mike has worked on New York’s eagle restoration program since it began in 1975. Led by DEC biologist Peter Nye—considered the father of modern bald eagle restoration—Mike

helped collect more than 150 nestling bald eagles, most of them from Alaska. Peter, Mike and other colleagues brought the young birds to New York, raised them in “hacking” towers, and released them when they were able to fly. “Mike’s work and personal life have revolved around eagles, a cause he has dedicated himself to fully,” says Peter.

Melissa Coleman



Jenny Landry and Mike Allen attach a radio transmitter to P26’s tail feathers.



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Clinic staff were careful when handling the sick eagle, making sure to protect themselves from the bird's sharp beak and talons.



When the eagle perked up, she was moved to Mike Allen's backyard to regain strength and prepare to be returned to the wild.

That's why the injured eagle, known by her Canadian wing tag as P26, found herself in good hands when she arrived at Mike's place one August day. Mike placed the special transport crate inside the flight cage, opened the top and tipped the box. Instead of a hasty exit to the far end of the enclosure or the belligerent display Mike expected, the bird calmly hopped up on the edge of the box, her brilliant yellow eyes fixed on Mike's face, just a foot away.

Mike instantly realized that this bird was a little different from the other eagles he'd worked with. "She could have easily jumped at me. Usually, eagles are pretty defensive and potentially dangerous. Some just go ballistic, screaming at you and flying around when you approach. Their talons can go right through your arm. They wouldn't hesitate to take a chunk of your hand or face with their beaks or talons if they were feeling threatened," says Mike, who bears the scars to prove it.

P26, Mike noted, seemed comfortable and very expressive. She used many of the normal vocalizations an eagle has in its repertoire, but at a greatly reduced volume, "almost like she knew she didn't have to shout," Mike recalls. "Don't get me wrong—there were times when she screamed like a banshee, but those were extremely infrequent." Most of P26's vocabulary consisted of twittering and purring sounds.

The large flight cage allows a bird to regain strength at its own pace without the stress of being pushed to fly. At first, weakened by her injury and the many weeks of cage rest at the vet clinic, P26 couldn't get across the flight cage very well. Flying to the higher perches was a challenge for her, as well. To help her make the transition from the floor to the higher perches, Mike placed a padded sawhorse midway in the cage.

Once she did fly, the bird experienced problems landing. "You could see her trying to grasp with the missing toe," Mike says. "It took a little time for her to figure it out."

As the summer days passed, P26 grew used to Mike's presence and didn't even flush when he approached. The combination of exercise, fresh air and a diet of squirrel and rabbit—roadkill from local highways—with the occasional fish dinner, resulted in an eagle brimming with good health and fitness, and eager to be free again.

When autumn rolled around, P26's demeanor changed, and Mike knew it was time. The eagle was strong, she could fly, and, for landings, she had learned to work around her disability. Eagles are capable of snagging prey with one foot if they have to, and much of their diet is carrion, so Mike felt sure that obtaining food would not be a problem. He scouted an area with large trees and water between two known eagle territories near the Montezuma Wildlife Refuge.

When released, P26 flew off strongly, and when Mike checked the area days later, she had moved on.



Mike Allen

Before releasing the eagle, Mike affixed a short-term transmitter to her tail feathers to allow him to track her whereabouts for four or five months. On October 20, just two months after he got her, Mike and Bill Stewart—Montezuma's assistant manager—flipped the carrier's lid off and stood back. This time P26 didn't hesitate. "She flew like a champ," Mike recalls.

But P26's drama was not quite over. Within five minutes of the release, a previously unknown pair of bald eagles appeared out of nowhere and bombarded the newcomer. Eagles are highly territorial and very aggressive encounters have been observed, occasionally ending in the death of one or both combatants.

"If one of them whacks her," Mike remembers thinking, "she'll come right down." The resident eagles settled into a tree about 15 feet away from P26 and launched an ear-splitting verbal assault. Over the next half-hour, the pair made several close passes at P26, attempting to drive her away. But she held her ground on the branch, dodging each flyby as it occurred. Finally one of the mated pair dove straight at P26.

Just before it reached her, and as Mike prepared to witness a slaughter, the aggressor broke off and the pair retreated, leaving P26 in peace.

Mike can't explain what might have caused the unusual end to the hostility. "I've been chasing eagles for more than 30 years and not one has ever explained what it's doing," he jests. Whatever the cause, he was relieved to return the following day to find P26 in the same tree fishing from a branch overhanging the water.

Two days later, when Mike checked the site, P26 was gone, this time seemingly for good. He could detect no signal from her transmitter either, meaning she was beyond its three-to-four-mile range. "I'd be more concerned if we did have a signal that wasn't moving," Mike says. "I like to think of her out there beeping somewhere. I guess we just have to wait and see if she goes another 21 years before checking in."

**Elaine Bloom** is a contributing editor to the *Conservationist*. She enjoys observing wildlife and considers herself lucky to have the woods right outside her back door.

**One hundred years ago**, more than 70 pairs of bald eagles nested in New York State, and hundreds more wintered here. By 1960, only one eagle nest remained. Loss of habitat and toxic contamination had all but erased eagles from New York. Since 1972, New York's eagle population has gone from near zero to booming, thanks to a national ban on DDT, federal prohibitions against taking bald eagles, and the initiation of New York's Endangered Species Program.

Between 1976 and 1988, New York's Bald Eagle Restoration Project re-established a breeding population of eagles by importing young birds from other states and hand-rearing them to independence (a process known as hacking). The hacked eagles thrived, returning to New York to nest and breed.