Ambassador Buddy

On April 27, 2008 a Bald Eagle hatched in a nest atop a loblolly pine at the Norfolk Botanical Garden. Thousands of individuals around the world watched that event – through a web-based EagleCam.

Some sharp-eyed Cam watchers soon noticed something growing on the side of the eaglet's beak. The eagle was ultimately taken from his nest and brought to the Wildlife Center for treatment.

The cause of that growth? Avian Pox.

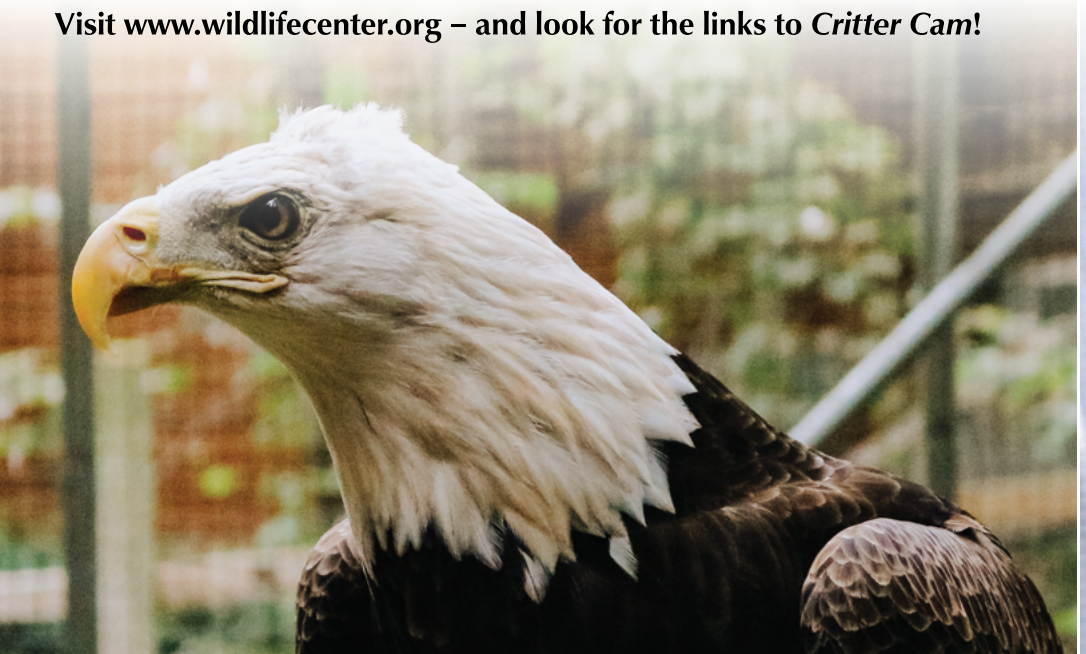
Despite an all-out effort by Center staff and a team of surgeons, the damage had been done – the pox lesion had scarred the underlying growth plate of the eagle's beak, and the beak would forever be misaligned.

So that eagle joined the Wildlife Center's team of resident education ambassadors. And he was officially named Buddy.

In September 2011, Buddy moved into a spacious new enclosure – a structure paid for through the sale of the *Garden of Eagles* calendar. This "palace" gives Buddy space to spread his wings, provides appropriate all-weather shelter and a good training environment, and great public visibility.

Fans of Buddy – with his distinctive crooked beak – may continue to check in on him. He is a regular "featured guest" on the Center's web-based *Critter Cam*, most often on Cam #1.

Visit www.wildlifecenter.org – and look for the links to *Critter Cam*!



Bald Eagles

A Wildlife Center of Virginia Update

January 2021

The resurgence of the Bald Eagle

is one of the great success stories of the conservation movement. In the 1600s – at the time of European settlement – an estimated half a million Bald Eagles populated what would become the United States.

But, by the mid-20th century, the eagle was brought to the edge of extinction, with loss of habitat, poaching, and the effects of DDT and other pesticides.

By 1970, according to the Center of Conservation Biology, there were only about 20 pairs of nesting Bald Eagles in Virginia.

Through an active partnership of federal, state, and local government agencies, conservation and environmental organizations, and concerned citizens, the Bald Eagle population is on the rebound.

There are now more than 3,000 active Bald Eagle nests in the Chesapeake Bay region. Once a rare sight even in traditional nesting areas along the lower James or Potomac or Rappahannock River, Bald Eagles are now being spotted – and are now nesting – across the Commonwealth!

The Wildlife Center of Virginia has played an important part in this resurgence.

The Center admitted its first Bald Eagle in 1985. It was an eagle found in King George County that had been poisoned by carbofuran, a potent pesticide. The Center successfully treated and released that eagle.

And then the Center led a long and successful campaign to ban the most common form of carbofuran [trade name Furadan] in Virginia ... and then across the United States.

That single policy change saves the lives of millions of birds, including Bald Eagles, every year.

The Wildlife Center also has spearheaded extensive research on environmental factors that affect eagles and other wildlife and worked to reform laws and regulations to strengthen the protections afforded to Bald Eagles.

Center President and Co-Founder Ed Clark with Education Ambassador Bald Eagle Skyler

Returning to the Wild

During 2020, the Wildlife Center admitted 39 eagles, from all across Virginia – eagles that were hit by cars or, in one case, a plane ... young eaglets discovered after storms destroyed their nests ... an Eagle that had been shot ... eagles poisoned by lead.

With cutting-edge medical care and focused rehabilitation, these Bald Eagles got a second chance at life in the wild!

"The Bald Eagle is more than just a symbol of our nation – it also stands as a symbol for native wildlife and environmental protection. The experience of the past half century proves that conservation works. Human thoughtlessness took the eagle to the brink of extinction; concerted and thoughtful environmental policy has brought the eagle back to our skies."

- Ed Clark

Patient #20-0055 being released into the wild.

Among the eagles released by the Center during 2020 were:

#19-3193. The Center kicked off 2020 with a New Year's Day release of a Bald Eagle in Pittsylvania County. This bird had been admitted in November 2019 with an abnormal heart rate and an enlarged heart – perhaps due to trauma or exposure to organophosphates [pesticides].

Some 100 individuals joined Center President Ed Clark for the New Year's Day eagle release.

As it turned out, because of COVID restrictions, this was not only the first, but also the last Bald Eagle release of 2020 that was open to the public. But, it was not the last release!

#19-3193 at the release site.

#20-0918 Release photographed by Barb Melton

#20-0055. This adult Bald Eagle reportedly "fell from the sky" in Accomack County on January 24. The eagle came with a very high level of lead in its blood – the highest lead levels ever seen by Dr. Karra Pierce, a Center veterinarian who has treated many eagles. Through an all-out effort by the Center's medical team, this eagle recovered, and was released by Dr. Karra on April 19 back in Accomack County.

#20-0918. This Bald Eagle was admitted after she was likely hit by a vehicle on I-264 in Portsmouth. The eagle was down ... but not out. When a wildlife rescuer arrived, she found the eagle had dug its talons into the thigh of a Good Samaritan who had tried to keep it from flying off.

That eagle had a host of medical issues, including severe head and eye injuries, swelling around the head, and fluid in her lungs and chest cavity. "It's just a miracle this bird is alive," Ed Clark told *The Virginian-Pilot.*

After nearly four months of care, recuperation, and rehabilitation, the eagle was taken back to Portsmouth for release. The eagle flew off agilely and settled briefly in a tree to orient herself before flying out of sight.

We discovered that this eagle is an offspring of ND, an eagle hatched in 2010 at the famous Norfolk Botanical Garden nest. In human terms, this eagle is the niece of Buddy [2008 hatch] and the Rock Stars [2011 hatch].

#20-1128 and #20-1129. On August 20, a Stafford County couple were enjoying the view from their deck when they spotted one large black bird – and then another. The birds couldn't fly ... but they could run. Animal Control Sergeant Anthony McCall [known in some quarters as "the eagle whisperer"] responded to the call and captured the birds – eagles displaced from their nest. Sgt. McCall transported the eaglets to the Wildlife Center.

About 10 weeks later, following weeks of care and flight training with rehabbers in the Center's 100-foot flight pen, Ed Clark returned the two eagles to that same spot and, with the homeowners and Sgt. McCall and his children looking on, released the two birds. The eagles put their new flight skills to use – both easily flew into the dense woods near the house and out of sight.

#20-2906. This adult eagle was found on the ground, unable to fly, on August 15 in Suffolk. Center veterinarians found a badly infected puncture wound in the eagle's shoulder; they surmise that the bird was on the losing side of a fight with another eagle. The wound was cleaned and disinfected and ultimately sutured closed through surgery.

The eagle was returned to the wild on November 3 – Election Day. Bald Eagles "really are the flagship species of the natural world," Ed Clark told WTKR-TV. "To be able to send him back to the wild lets us be comforted. No matter how divided we are as a people or how polarized, we are all Americans."

#20-2906 Release photographed by Michael Lemke

Lead Poisoning of Bald Eagles

Many of the Bald Eagles admitted to the Center for treatment arrive with dangerous levels of lead in their blood.

Lead is a heavy metal that attacks the nervous system, internal organs, and muscles. Unless treated, high lead levels can cause blindness, convulsions, and death.

This lead exposure is not because eagles are being shot; it's because they are scavenging other animals that have been shot. Eagles are ingesting fragments of lead bullets and shotgun pellets left in the remains of deer and small game that have been shot with lead-based ammunition. The lead is quickly absorbed into the bloodstream and spread throughout the body.

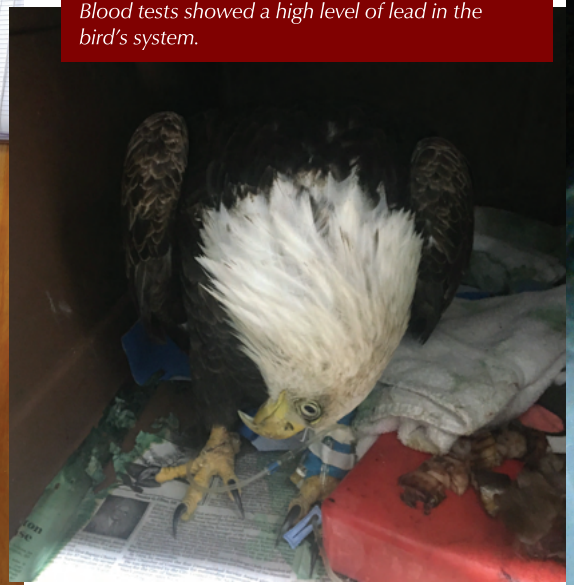
A lead fragment no bigger than a grain of rice can kill a Bald Eagle.

The Wildlife Center uses a chemical process known as chelation to flush lead from an eagle's system. Unfortunately, few birds admitted with high lead levels are able to fully recover from the systemic damage caused by lead.

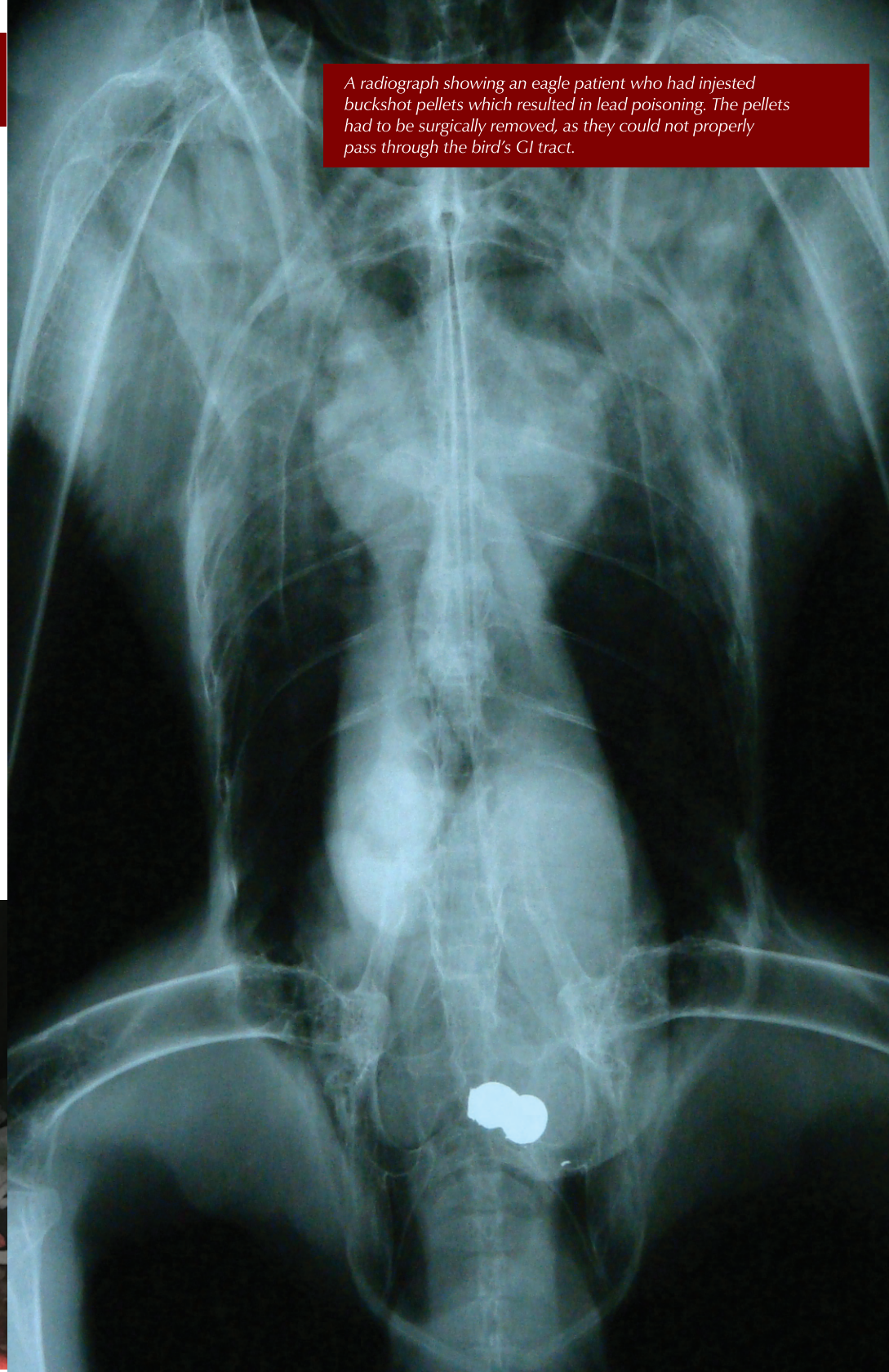
The Wildlife Center is waging a national campaign to encourage hunters to switch to non-lead ammunition for hunting. This is an easy step that **ALL** hunters can take today to protect Bald Eagles.

Patient #20-3695 was admitted after being found in a field and presented with dehydration and a depressed mentation. When tested, this eagle was found to have very high lead levels.

Patient #20-0055 was admitted after "falling from the sky" and presented with neurologic symptoms. Blood tests showed a high level of lead in the bird's system.



A radiograph showing an eagle patient who had injested buckshot pellets which resulted in lead poisoning. The pellets had to be surgically removed, as they could not properly pass through the bird's GI tract.



"Rock Star" Eagle NZ

Back in 2011, a pair of Bald Eagles nesting at the Norfolk Botanical Garden were raising three chicks that had hatched in mid-March. Thousands of individuals across the United States – and around the world – watched these eagles through a web-based eagle cam.

That spring, the female eagle – widely known as "Mom Norfolk" – was struck and killed by a plane landing at the nearby airport. The three eaglets were brought to the Wildlife Center and placed in a hastily constructed nest.

The three eagles were banded – NV, NX, and NZ.

Dr. Miranda Sadar preparing NZ for release. Photo by James Deal

On July 27, in front of a crowd of some 1,200 fans at the historic Berkeley Plantation, the three eagles were released.

One of the three Rock Stars – NX – was outfitted with a transmitter. Eagle fans were able to keep track of her travels for five years before the battery on the transmitter finally gave out [transmitter batteries typically only last about two years]. The last report from NX came in November 2016.

But, without transmitters, NV and NZ flew off and, basically, disappeared. Until November 2020 – more than nine years after release.

On November 17, NZ was rescued from a landfill in King George County. The eagle was taken to Altons' Keep Wildlife Rehabilitation and Rescue in Suffolk and then was admitted to the Wildlife Center on November 20.

Sadly, the Center's veterinary team found that NZ had suffered grievous injuries – most likely she had been hit by a car.

NZ sustained a fracture of her right leg that was open and badly contaminated. More seriously, trauma to her right wing had fractured all of the delicate bones at the end of her wing, the soft tissue and bones were infected, and the bone fragments had already started to die. The only course of action would have been amputation of the wing tip.

With these injuries, there was no chance of returning NZ to the wild. Placement in captivity also wasn't a viable option – NZ would have faced a long, difficult, and painful recuperation and a difficult life in captivity. After much evaluation and discussion, the veterinary team made the difficult decision to euthanize NZ.

While the outcome is not what anyone would have wanted, we do celebrate that NZ had nine years in the wild – living and thriving as a wild eagle should. Back in 2011, she had been given a second chance ... and she took it!

Dr. Karra and Dr. Sarah examining NZ upon re-admission.

O Canada!

In May 2017, a resident in Alexandria spotted a young Bald Eagle on the ground, unable to fly. The eaglet was brought to the Wildlife Center of Virginia.

The Center's veterinary team examined the bird and found no particular problems; the eagle spent several months in the Center's outdoor pens, perfecting his flight skills. Individuals watching him on the Center's web-based *Critter Cam* learned to identify him by his purple cupcake bumpers – small pads that help buffer an eagle's wrists during captivity.

Later that summer, the eagle was released at Mason Neck State Park, along the Potomac River, just outside the Capitol Beltway. The eagle was outfitted with a small tracking transmitter; the bird was now known as **MN 72** [for Mason Neck].

In June 2018 – the next summer – the eagle started a trip north. In July, the eagle crossed into Canada and settled along the Saint-François River in Quebec. The eagle spent the summer there and then, in October, headed south. By November, the eagle was in Potomac Heights, Maryland, just across the Potomac from his Mason Neck release site.

In 2019, the eagle made the same trip! The eagle started north in June, and by July was back at the same spot on the Saint-François River. After another summer in Quebec, the eagle started south in October, settling in Indian Head, Maryland – again, just across the Potomac from his Mason Neck release site.

And, again, in 2020! Last summer, the eagle headed north and was back along the Saint-François by the end of July. Then, in October, the eagle headed south and was back in Indian Head on October 29.

Since 2011, the Center has followed the travels of almost two dozen Bald Eagles equipped with transmitters. Some of these eagles – like NX – have stayed "close to home"; NX never ventured far from the lower Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers.

Other Center-treated eagles have gone as far north as New Brunswick in Canada ... and as far south as South Carolina.

For additional information on eagle tracking, visit https://www.wildlifecenter.org/critter-corner/success-stories