

*The Wildlife
Center
of Virginia
Special Report*

BALD EAGLES

2008-2017



“Buddy”

The first phone call – in May 2008 – was from the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries (DGIF).

There was a young Bald Eagle in a nest at the Norfolk Botanical Garden – a hatchling that had attracted an international fan base through a web-based EagleCam hosted by WVEC-TV. Some sharp-eyed Cam watchers had noticed something on the side of the eagle’s beak – and it seemed to be growing. The State Wildlife Veterinarian was planning to go to Norfolk to examine the eagle. If necessary, would the Wildlife Center of Virginia be able to care for the bird?

On May 22, Nuckols Tree Care used a bucket truck to retrieve the eagle from its nest – up about 90 feet in a loblolly pine – and lower him to the ground. The DGIF Wildlife Veterinarian examined the eaglet and made the call to have him taken to the Wildlife Center in Waynesboro.

Upon admission, the eagle was assigned Patient #08-0887 – the 887th patient of the year at the Center.

And that’s when the calls really started coming in.

During the next few days, hundreds of concerned eagle fans contacted the Center – by phone, by email, by mail, in person – to try to figure out what was going on with “their” eaglet. Callers had LOTS of suggestions for the eagle’s medical treatment, housing, dietary preferences, etc., etc. But mostly – they called because they cared ... and were concerned.

Upon admission, #08-0887 was given a complete physical examination, including radiographs and a battery of blood tests. On May 24, the eaglet was taken to a nearby “human” hospital for an MRI.

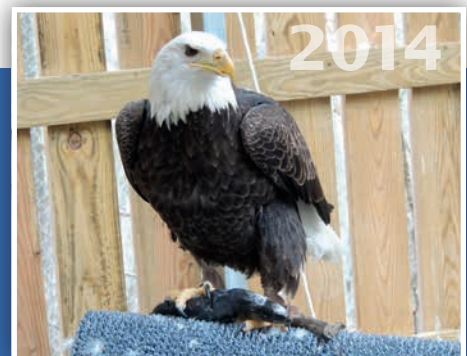
Tests ultimately determined that the eagle had Avian Pox. The growth on the side of the eagle’s beak was a large pox lesion. There is no cure for this pox; Center veterinarians began intensive supportive care to strengthen the eaglet’s immune system. The bird was treated with antibiotics and anti-fungal medications to prevent secondary infections.

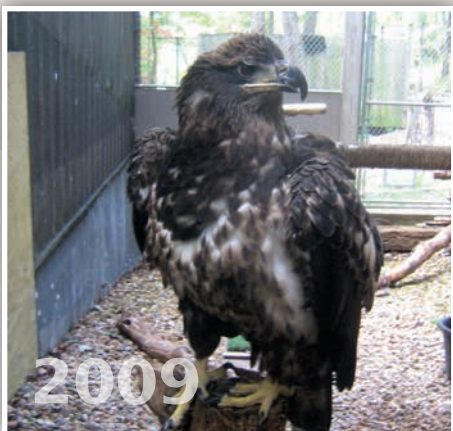


The pox lesion stopped growing, started shrinking, and ultimately fell off.

On July 12, Center veterinarians operated on the eagle – to clean out the remnants of the lesion and to repair damage to bone and beak tissue. To assist, the Center flew in Dr. R. Avery Bennett, a board-certified veterinary surgeon and Professor of Veterinary Clinical Medicine at the College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign – a world-renowned surgeon.

And then the waiting game began. For the next 15 months, Center vets monitored the bird’s health and development. Every two or three weeks, vets trimmed the eagle’s beak, in the hope that #08-0887’s beak would ultimately grow out straight.





Despite this all-out effort, the damage had been done – the pox lesion had scarred the underlying growth plate of the beak, and the eagle’s beak would forever be misaligned. In August 2009, the Center announced that the bird could not be returned to the wild.

On April 27, 2010 – the eagle’s second hatch-day – the Center made the formal announcement that #08-0887 would become a permanent resident at the Center, joining the team of wildlife education animals.

And the Center also announced that the eagle’s name would be Buddy.

In September 2011, Buddy moved into his 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.

Buddy made his first official off-site public appearance on May 5, 2012 – appropriately enough, at the Norfolk Botanical Garden Eagle Fest. Since then, Buddy has appeared across Virginia – with Jack Hanna at the Paramount Theater in Charlottesville [twice] ... Great Bridge Primary School in Chesapeake ... a Stonewall Brigade concert in Staunton ... the Virginia State Fair [two years] ... the annual Riverfest event in Waynesboro [three times] ... and at the Center’s Annual Gala [three times].

And in December 2012, Buddy resumed his position as an online “star” when he made his first appearance on *Critter*



Cam, the Wildlife Center’s web-based live cam feed. Buddy is now a regular “guest” on *Critter Cam* – most often on Channel 1. Buddy’s fans can watch him eat, bathe, stretch, preen, sun, and play – one of his favorite toys is a box of rocks. [No, seriously.]

Cover Photo of Buddy, courtesy of Shelly Hokanson.



“The Rock Stars”

On April 27, 2011 – Buddy’s third hatch-day – three of his siblings were admitted to the Wildlife Center. Like Buddy, they were hatched in the nest at the Norfolk Botanical Garden and, like Buddy, they were known to cam-watchers far and wide. On April 26, their mother – “Mom Norfolk” – was struck and killed by a plane at the Norfolk airport. DGIF officials determined that the eaglets’ best chance of survival was to have them cared for at the Center. Wildlife Center staff quickly constructed a nest for housing the eaglets ... and also quickly set up *Critter Cam*, so that web-cam watchers could continue to check in on the eagles.

The eaglets were assigned Center Patient Numbers #11-0474, 0475, and 0476, but they were also known by their leg band letters – NZ, NX, and NV. The eaglets received a complete physical examination and were found to be in good shape.

The three eagles spent the next three months in outdoor enclosures at the Wildlife Center, where they grew and learned to fly. By mid-July, the Center’s team determined that they were ready to be returned to the wild, along with two other hatch-year eagles also under the Center’s care. One of the Norfolk eaglets – NX – was to be outfitted with a tiny transmitter, which would allow researchers – and eagle fans – to track her post-release travels.

On July 27, a blistering hot summer day, a crowd of more than 1,000 gathered at the historic Berkeley Plantation on the James River below Richmond for a quintuple eagle release – unprecedented in the Center’s history. One by one, the five eagles were released and, to the gasps and cheers and applause of the crowd, all flew off fine.

Well, except for NX.

NX flew out over the crowd, but soon landed in the brush. DGIF biologists and Center staff spotted her and found her to be tired and stressed. The decision was made to take NX back to the Center to spend more time in the flight pen.

Fast forward to August 30 – NX was back at Berkeley Plantation for release. Center President Ed Clark launched NX up into the air ... she flew across a field, made a u-turn, and ultimately flew about 15 to 20 feet up in a tree.

Through the transmitter, we were able to track NX. In the days right after her release, NX stuck close to Berkeley ... but she then ventured north and east to the lower Potomac River.

On December 2 – about three months after her successful release – NX was back at the Wildlife Center, as a patient. On December 1, she



was found in the middle of the road near the Ophelia Post Office [Northumberland County]. The Center's veterinary staff found injuries that suggested that NX had been hit by a car.

NX spent months recuperating and slowly built up her flight skills in the Center's outdoor pens. On May 16, NX was taken to the Rappahannock River Valley National Wildlife Refuge - not far from the spot of her December 2011 rescue - and released back into the wild. Ed Clark reported that NX flew 75 yards into a tall tree, sat there for a few minutes, and then flew through the woods, over an estuary, into the forest, and out of sight.

Transmitters used to track Bald Eagles are generally expected to last about two years. For whatever reason, NX's transmitter provided data transmissions fairly regularly for five years.

NX was mostly a "homebody" after her May 2012 release. She generally reported in from the Northern Neck - the peninsula between the Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers - although she occasionally ventured to northern Virginia [Quantico area] and into Maryland. Favorite hangouts included Rosier Creek [a Potomac tributary just north of Colonial Beach] and Machodoc Creek in King George County. Her last check-in came on September 8, 2016 - back on Rosier Creek.



*Release of
NZ by Center
Veterinary
Fellow Miranda
Sadar.
Photo courtesy
of Jim Deal.*

*Release
of NX
by Ed
Clark on
August
30, 2011.
Photo
courtesy
of Bob
Mislan.*

“HK”

Sadly, not all stories have the ending we hope and work for.

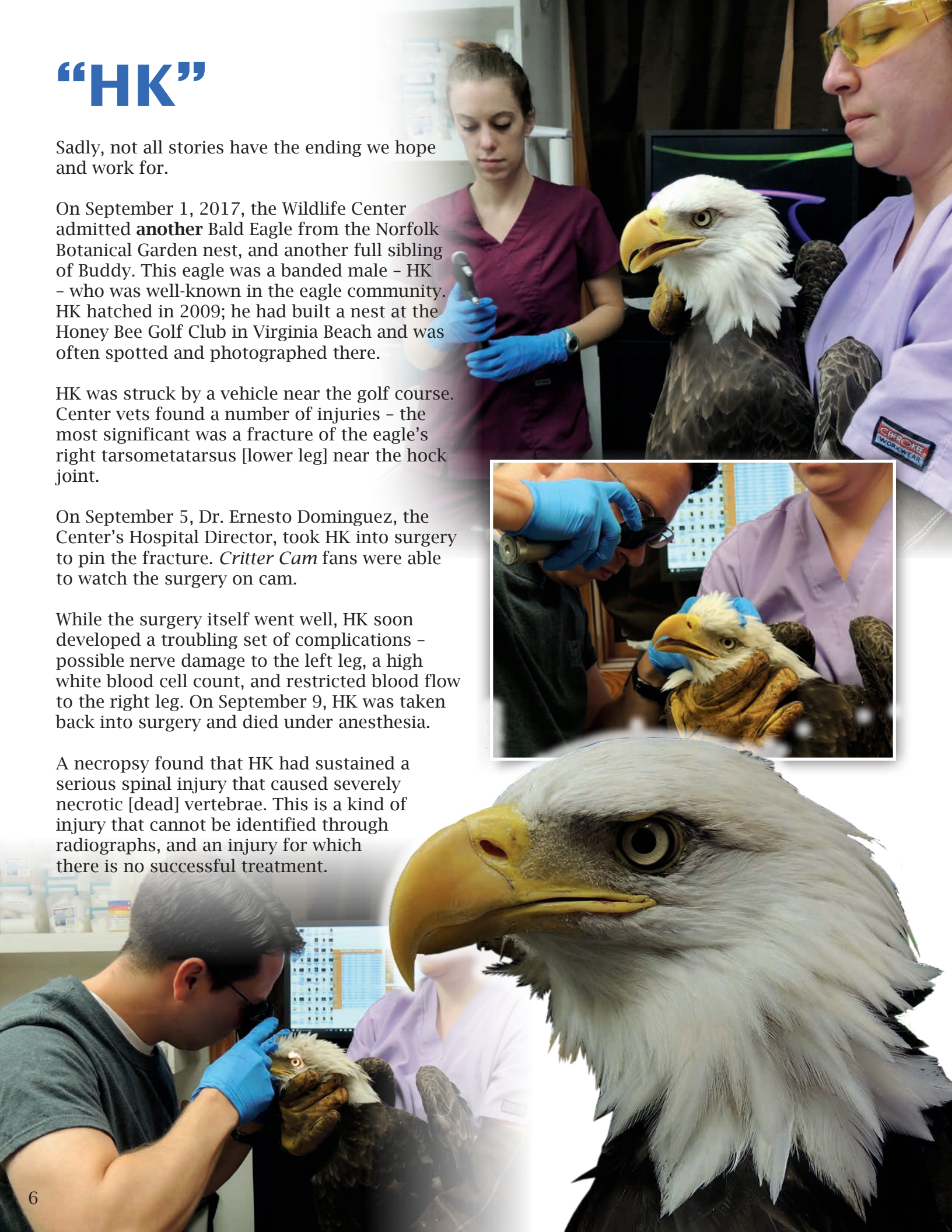
On September 1, 2017, the Wildlife Center admitted **another** Bald Eagle from the Norfolk Botanical Garden nest, and another full sibling of Buddy. This eagle was a banded male - HK - who was well-known in the eagle community. HK hatched in 2009; he had built a nest at the Honey Bee Golf Club in Virginia Beach and was often spotted and photographed there.

HK was struck by a vehicle near the golf course. Center vets found a number of injuries - the most significant was a fracture of the eagle's right tarsometatarsus [lower leg] near the hock joint.

On September 5, Dr. Ernesto Dominguez, the Center's Hospital Director, took HK into surgery to pin the fracture. *Critter Cam* fans were able to watch the surgery on cam.

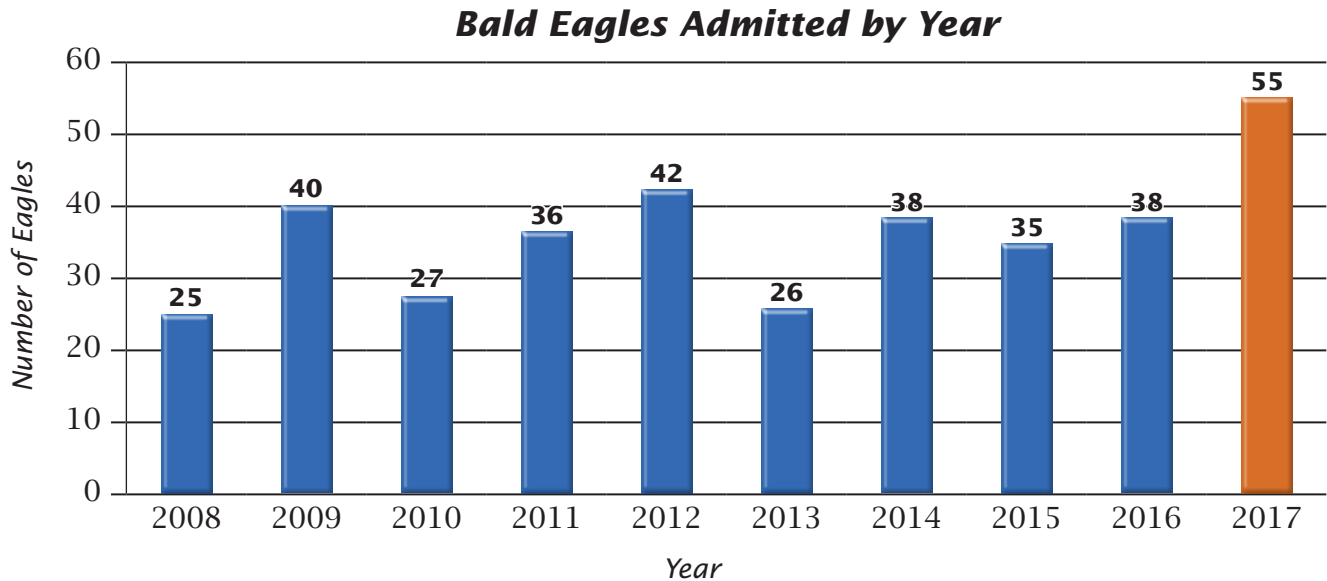
While the surgery itself went well, HK soon developed a troubling set of complications - possible nerve damage to the left leg, a high white blood cell count, and restricted blood flow to the right leg. On September 9, HK was taken back into surgery and died under anesthesia.

A necropsy found that HK had sustained a serious spinal injury that caused severely necrotic [dead] vertebrae. This is a kind of injury that cannot be identified through radiographs, and an injury for which there is no successful treatment.



The Wildlife Center

During the past 10 years, the period 2008 to 2017, the Wildlife Center of Virginia admitted 362 Bald Eagles:

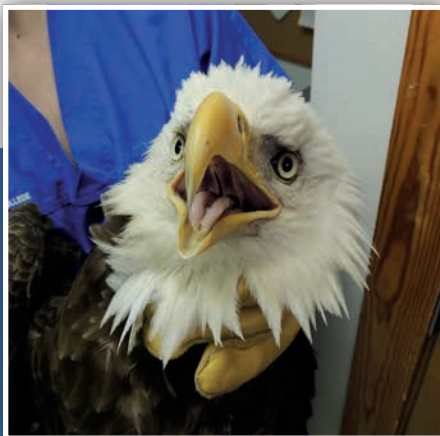


The 55 Bald Eagles admitted during 2017 represents a record in the Wildlife Center's 35-year history.

This increase in Bald Eagle cases is in part a reflection of the resurgence of the Bald Eagle population in Virginia - one of the great success stories of the conservation movement. According to the Center for Conservation Biology, in 1970 there were only about 20 pairs of nesting eagles in Virginia. By 2007, that population had climbed to 500 pairs. In 2016, for the first time, the CCB survey found more than 1,000 active Bald Eagle nests.

In recent years, the Center has admitted eagles:

- Struck by a car or truck, or a plane, or a DC Metro train;
- Injured in fights with other eagles [often territorial disputes];
- Rescued from landfills;
- Poisoned by carbofuran [a banned pesticide] or pentobarbital [a euthanasia drug often used by veterinarians].



The Center admitted eagles that had been shot, and young eagles that had fallen from their nests or had nests destroyed by windstorms or tornados. The Center also admitted a Bald Eagle with a large fish hook lodged in its gizzard ... an eagle that had eaten balloon pieces.

Some eagles have received care at the Center for many months – others for only a few days.

Bald Eagle #14-1905, for example, was a patient at the Center for only two weeks. This juvenile eagle was found on the ground at a landfill in Dublin, Virginia on August 15, 2014. The eagle was dull, unresponsive, and holding its feet in a clutched position – all signs of exposure to some toxin.

Center staff administered fluids and gave supportive care, and the eagle rebounded quickly. On August 28 – just 13 days after its rescue from the landfill – the eagle was

released at Claytor Lake State Park near Dublin.

Bald Eagle #17-0968 was another landfill rescue – but her recovery took significantly longer. This young adult female was found on the ground at a landfill in Stafford; she could not fly and would fall over when approached. Admitted to the Center on May 16, 2017, the eagle was thin and had fresh abrasions; her primary feathers were tattered, and she was covered in dust and dirt.

Center vets suspected that the bird had been hit by a vehicle or injured in a fight and had ingested a toxin [lab tests subsequently revealed an exposure to pesticides].

The process for recovery and rehabilitation was much longer for this landfill eagle – 146 days. On October 9 the eagle was released at Caledon State Park.



The Poisoning of Bald Eagles

During 2017, the Center admitted 55 Bald Eagles; 70 percent arrived with dangerous levels of lead in their blood.

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

The lead causing this wave of poisoning is not because eagles are being shot. Eagles are scavengers; they are ingesting lead fragments as they eat. The source of this lead is fragments of lead bullets and shotgun pellets left in the remains of deer and small game that have been shot by hunters or others who use lead-based ammunition for rifles, shotguns, and other firearms. The eagle's digestive fluids and stomach acids break down the lead, allowing it to be absorbed quickly into the bloodstream and spread throughout the body.

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

There are treatment options available for lead-poisoned eagles, if we get the poisoned birds quickly enough. Through a chemical process known as chelation, the lead can be flushed

from an eagle's system. Sadly, few birds with high lead levels make a complete recovery.

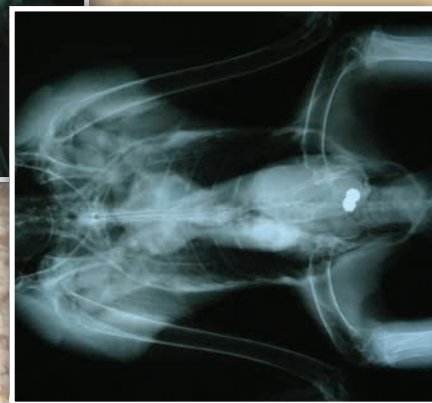
To solve the problem, we must address the source of the poisoning. The Wildlife Center is mounting a national campaign to encourage hunters to switch to non-lead ammunition for hunting.

This is a step that ALL hunters can take today.

Lead found in an eagle's feces.



X-rays of an eagle showing lead buckshot in the digestive system.



We Treat to Release ...

From 2008 to 2017, the Wildlife Center has released **72 Bald Eagles** back into the wild, and each of these releases was a public celebration. The five-eagle release at Berkeley Plantation in July 2011 drew more than 1,000 celebrants, from across the United States. The release of a Bald Eagle at Chippokes Plantation on a snowy day in February 2015 - a hearty crowd of only a few dozen.

During the past five years, the Center has released Bald Eagles at these eagle-friendly sites:

In the past five years, Center staff - mostly Ed Clark - have driven about 4,280 miles from Waynesboro to eagle release sites across Virginia. That's the one-way mileage-equivalent to driving from Waynesboro to the Panama Canal.

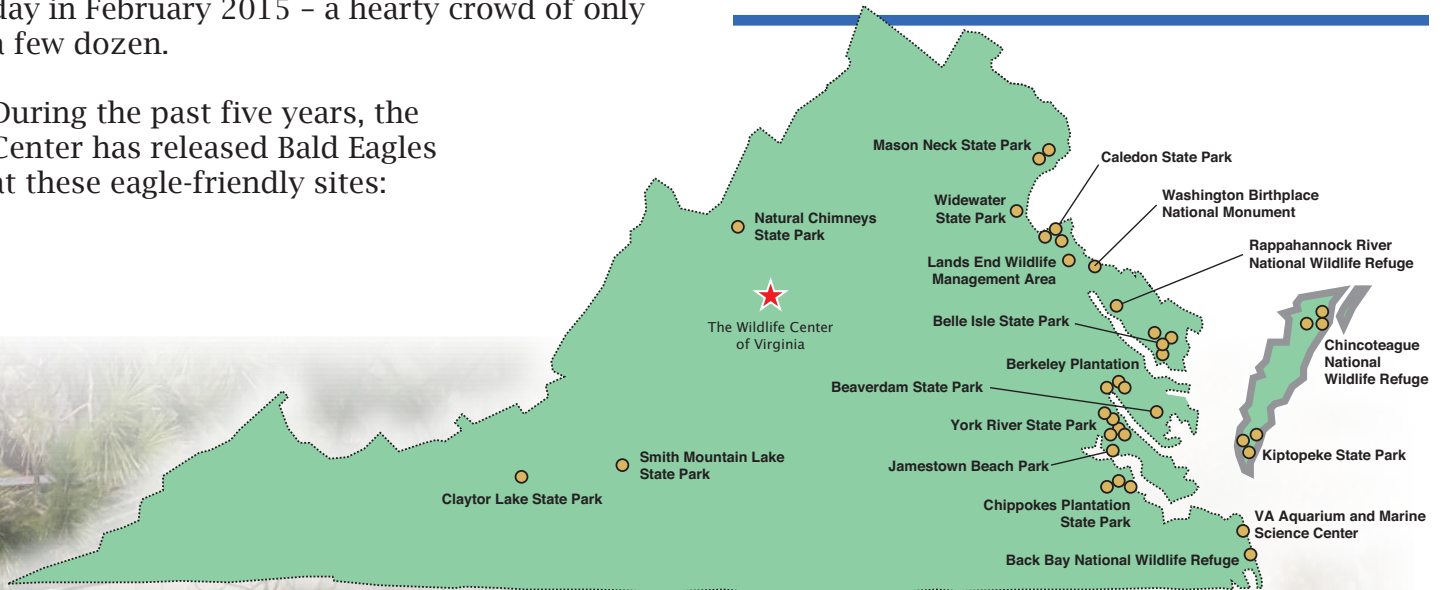


Photo by
Jim Yanello





Photo by
Jack Looney

During the past decade, 18 Bald Eagles treated by the Wildlife Center were released with tiny transmitters. These eagles are part of a larger ongoing research study that monitors eagle movements. Looking at the heights at which eagles fly, average distances, and frequent flight corridors, biologists can help resolve real-life issues, such as placement of wind turbines, aircraft strikes, etc.

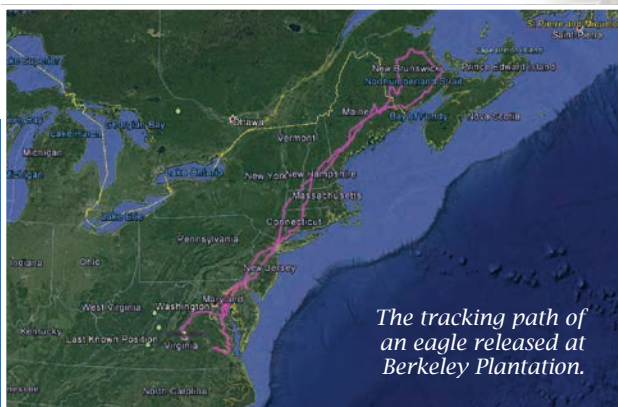
The GPS transmitters are fitted on the eagles with Teflon straps – similar to how a human would wear a backpack. Data is transmitted through cell-phone technology. The tiny transmitter relies on lithium batteries but also is outfitted with solar chargers.

So ... where have the Center's released eagles traveled?

- Two of the eagles – one released at Natural Chimney State Park in December 2014, and one released in October 2015 at Smith Mountain Lake – went south for the winter, to South Carolina.
- Another eagle was released at Berkeley Plantation in December 2015. In early June 2016, the eagle checked in from New Brunswick – north of the border in Canada. The eagle spent a little more than a month in New Brunswick; in mid-July, the eagle started heading south, more or less retracing her path back to Virginia.

"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 50 years 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



The tracking path of an eagle released at Berkeley Plantation.



2018 Eagle Update

Bald Eagle #18-0086

Admission Date: February 15, 2018

Release Date: March 23, 2018

In mid-February, Karen Louvar, the Collections Manager of Stratford Hall, the historic plantation home of the Lee family, was walking the estate grounds when she saw a Bald Eagle fall from a tree. The eagle was unable to fly and was captured by Conservation Police Officer Dan Rabago. The eagle was transported to the Wildlife Center in Waynesboro on February 15 and admitted as Patient #18-0086 – the 86th patient of 2018.

Upon admission, the eagle received a complete physical examination, including radiographs, by Dr. Monica Madera, the Center's veterinary intern. The eagle had a low heart rate, bruising on her keel, and foot abrasions. The eagle received fluids, anti-inflammatories, and atrophine [to help increase the bird's low heart rate]. It's likely that the eagle was injured in a fight with another eagle. #18-0086 was moved to a small outdoor enclosure.

In the next few weeks, the eagle continued her recuperation and built up strength and stamina; the Center's veterinary and rehabilitation staff determined that the eagle was ready to be returned to the wild.

On March 23, Center President Ed Clark took the Bald Eagle back to Stratford Hall for release. The release was in front of the historic home,

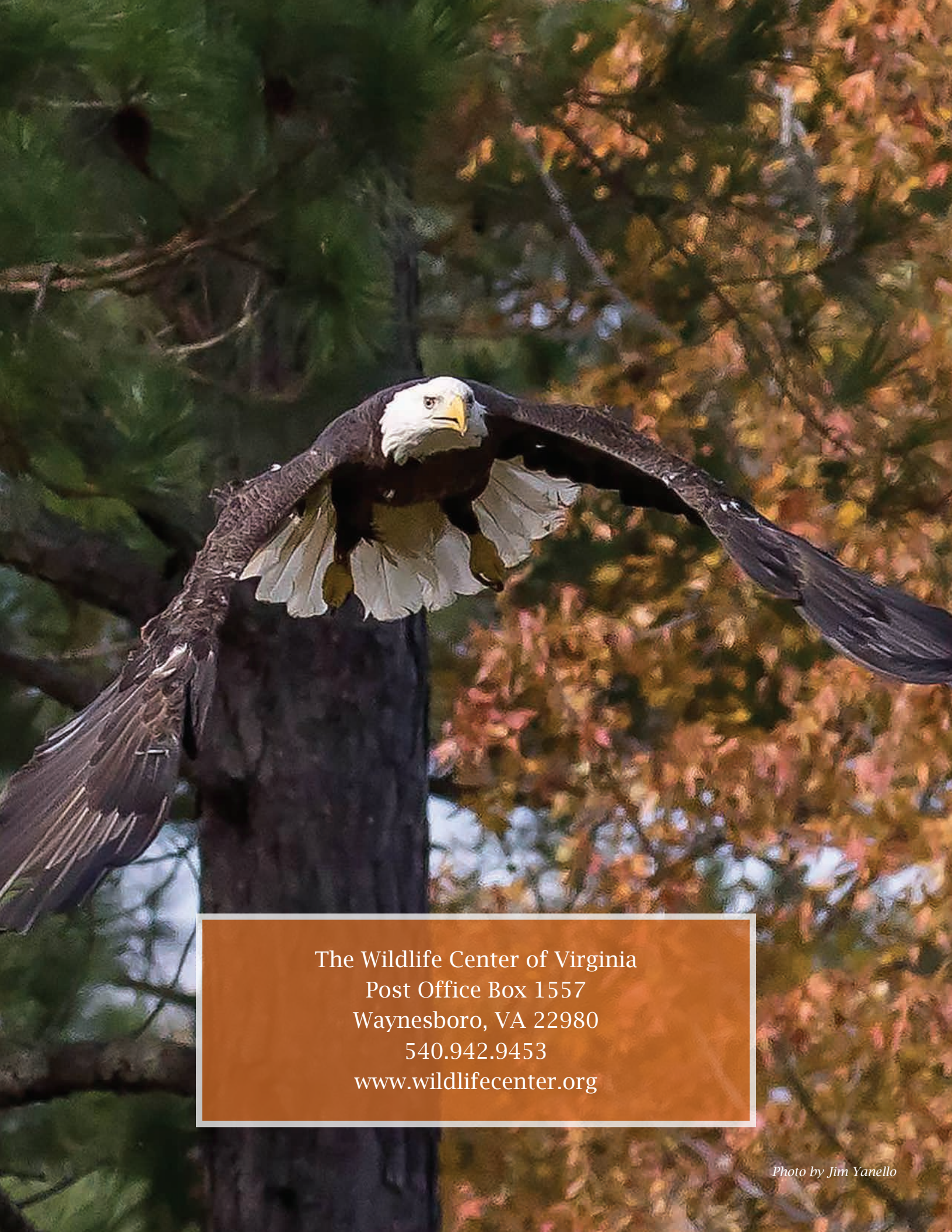
only a few hundred yards from the February rescue site – likely the closest proximity of rescue and release spots for a Bald Eagle in the Center's 35-year history! In front of a chilly crowd of about 200 people, including both Karen and CPO Dan, Ed tossed the eagle into the air – the eagle flew off toward a nearby tree line, and out of sight.



Center President Ed Clark and CPO Dan Rabago at the Stratford Hall release.

Photo courtesy of Roberta Sonnino.





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Photo by Jim Yanello