

A BIRD OF PREY'S FREEDOM DAY

Once near death, now full of life, eagle takes off

The female bird found two months ago was injured, mite-infested and stinky — volunteers nursed her back to health

By David Sneed

Kelly Vandenneuvel, right, and Joe Miller of Pacific Wildlife Care release a golden eagle in Harmony. The golden eagle ran down a hill before taking flight.

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A little more than two months after it was found near death in the North Coast hamlet of Harmony, a female golden eagle spread its wings and soared free Friday.

A handful of volunteers with the animal rescue group Pacific Wildlife Care whooped and hollered as the eagle made a running start down a hill behind a ranch just south of Harmony and took flight. It glided across Highway 1 and turned north.

“It was an electrifying experience,” said Susan Belany of Cambria, who had rescued the eagle.

The bird weighed 15.2 pounds when it was released, a little heavier than a female eagle in the wild, said Kelly Vandenneuvel, who rehabilitated the Harmony eagle and two others at her Cayucos ranch this fall. The extra weight will give the bird a head start as it readjusts to the demands of life in the wild.



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The eagle was briefly disoriented by its freedom. Vandenheuvel took the lid off the bird's carrying cage and the eagle flapped a few feet away and hunkered down in the grass. This happened several times before Vandenheuvel herded the bird downhill.

"She could feel the wind and just kept going," Belany said.

The healthy eagle was a stark contrast to the bird Belany found Aug. 26 lying by the side of the road with its feet sticking in the air. She thought the bird was dead, but when she approached it, she noticed that it was breathing.

A volunteer with Pacific Wildlife Care, Belany had gloves, blankets, a carrying case and other rescue equipment in her car. She bundled up the eagle, and the long process of rehabilitation began.

Rescuers theorize that the eagle had been hit by a car. In its weakened state, it became infested by mites and sprayed by a skunk. Veterinarians Steven Paulick of Arroyo Grande and David Edsall of Atascadero helped nurse it back to health.

Vandenheuvel had considered giving the eagle a soft release, which entails opening the flight cage in Cayucos and letting the bird readjust to life in the wild. But this eagle is a mature adult, old enough to have established its own territory around Harmony.

"It's always best to release them back into their own territory," Vandenheuvel said.

The Golden Eagle a very sacred bird to me. THANKS to all of the humans who cared and nursed this magnificent bird back to health. She was very fortunate to have been given the chance to live and thrive to the point she could be released back to her natural habitat. It makes my heart very happy to see her healthy enough to regain her freedom.