



Tom Clifton

It was Christmas Day last year when Natural Resources Police Corporal Dan Yankie got the call about a bald eagle shot dead on his Montgomery County beat. Three days later, his phone rang again, this time about a gravely injured eagle that died a short time later of a gunshot wound.

The outcry was immediate and intense. Media outlets across the country publicized the killings. Anonymous donors and animal advocacy groups quickly created a reward fund of \$8,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of the shooters.

“Bald eagles affect everyone, from the bird lover to the patriot,” says Yankie, a 25-year veteran of NRP and the Maryland Park Service. “But there are definitely people out there who are craven enough to kill an eagle.”

Despite the fact that the bald eagle is revered as our national symbol and was only recently removed from the federal and state lists of endangered species, more than a dozen eagles are felled each year in Maryland.

“They are found shot, poisoned, tangled in debris or can ingest toxins,” says Dr. Cindy Driscoll, the State’s wildlife veterinarian, who often helps investigators look for clues in their cases. “People should remember that although eagles are no longer endangered, they are still protected.”

But it’s not only eagles that suffer. For example, a total of 129 Maryland raptors — ranging from eagles and hawks to owls and vultures — were treated last year by Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research, a Delaware-based clinic that specializes in the care of ill, injured and orphaned wild birds.

“Every bird that comes in has a story,” says Dr. Sallie Welte, the non-profit clinic’s director. “It’s unfortunate that these injuries occur, but it’s fortunate that people care enough to take time out of their days to ensure that the birds get here.”

Wildlife experts and law enforcement officials insist that hard-fought efforts to restore the bald eagle population over the last four decades should not be undermined by indiscriminate killings.

The bald eagle was declared an endangered species in the United States in 1967. Protective laws and the banning of the pesticide DDT, which caused the thinning of egg shells, put the birds on the road to recovery.

In 2007, the bird was removed from protection under the Endangered Species Act and Maryland followed suit in 2010. But it is still illegal to shoot eagles* — a conviction carries a maximum fine of \$5,000 and up to one year in prison.

As a result of tough laws and an adoring public, Maryland has more than 500 nesting pairs of bald eagles, at least one pair in every county. Eagles along the upper Chesapeake Bay and inland lay eggs in late February or early March that hatch in April.

Welte and Driscoll say there is no plausible excuse for shooting a distinctive mature bald eagle, with its white head and tail and golden beak and talons.

“It’s intentional,” says Welte. “There’s responsible hunting and then there’s poaching and freelance shooting without respect for life.”

Trying to excuse a shooting by claiming it was a case of mistaken identity won’t fly, either. Under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act, killing a turkey vulture — or a hawk, owl or osprey — is punishable by a fine of up to \$15,000 and imprisonment of up to six months.

As opportunistic feeders, bald eagles and other raptors often fall victim to another deadly hazard: secondary poisoning by farmers trying to eliminate nuisance rats or predators, such as foxes and raccoons. There have even been cases

TO REPORT AN INJURED RAPTOR, call the Natural Resources Police Communications Center 410-260-8888.

TO ANONYMOUSLY REPORT A SHOOTING, call the catch-a-poacher hotline at 1-800-635-6124, where a reward is possible.

of eagles dying after eating pets euthanized by veterinarians, but not buried in deep enough graves by the owners.

Eagles, hawks, owls and osprey face additional hazards created by traffic, power lines and lead poisoning from ammunition.

“Nursing raptors back to health is difficult because you can’t reason with the patients,” Welte says.

“They have to relax enough in captivity to heal, to eat without being tube- or force-fed. And we have to prevent secondary feather and foot damage that sometimes happens in captivity,” she explains.

According to Dr. Allison Wack, a veterinarian at the Maryland Zoo who assists DNR with cases, the outcome often comes with an emotional payback. Just recently, someone dropped off a fledgling kestrel that was being kicked by children in downtown Baltimore. After a little TLC, the bird was returned to downtown and released to the custody of its waiting parents.

“It’s an amazing feeling to know that you are contributing in some small way to helping wildlife,” Wack says. “It’s one of the highlights of our job — we deal mostly with captive animals — seeing them go back out to the wild.”

If rehabilitation is hard work, so is catching the perpetrators.

In Yankie’s cases, the first eagle was shot with a rifle in a Brookeville field as it fed on a deer carcass. The second was killed by shotgun as it flew through a Darnestown neighborhood.

Both cases remain unsolved, the \$8,000 reward money left unclaimed.



Hawk

“They’ll likely stay that way,” says Yankie, “unless someone steps forward with new information. People know the laws and know this is a serious crime. Someone convicted isn’t going to be sent to the county jail and eat bologna sandwiches for a week. They’re going to a federal facility.” ■

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FLYING FREE

Protecting Maryland raptors

By Candy Thomson

* An Eagle Depredation Permit may be granted by the U.S. Department on the Interior to take or disturb bald or golden eagles only if they have become injurious to wildlife, agriculture or other personal property, or human health or safety.