

Bald eagle soars back to freedom

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MORGANZA - Veterinarians removed a horse blanket from over a large, gray travel kennel, unlatched the door and set Montana free.

Montana, a bald eagle nursed back to health at the LSU Raptor and Wildlife Rehabilitation Unit after an injury, quickly and gracefully spread his wings to their 5-foot span, took off and flew into heavy winds, then banked back around and headed for distant trees.

The people who treated Montana, others from the LSU School of Veterinary Medicine and a representative of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service bid Montana farewell.

After six weeks in their care, Montana was free. He was gone.

Or so they thought.

About 10 minutes later, Tami St. Germain of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service shouted, "Hey, look! There's Montana, and he's found a friend."

Montana and another bald eagle were flying together over the tree tops and the waters of the **Morganza** Spillway.

"Go, Montana. Go," said Leslie Tircuit, coordinator of the unit.

"I know what we should write on his release sheet: 'Plays well with others'," she said.

"It's totally incredible. It's unbelievable, uncanny," Tircuit said.

Montana, named by students, was first seen eating carion on a roadside near Houma.

Humane Society representative Karen Hadad was called out to catch the bird, and had to chase him 500 yards.

Veterinarians determined he had been hit by a car and diagnosed him with a pelvic fracture, which requires cage rest.

A man called in after he saw a short story and photo of the eagle and said he thought he might have been the person who hit the bird, Tircuit said. The man had not come forward before because he didn't think he had actually hit the eagle.

Montana is only the second bald eagle to be released by the unit and the fourth one to be treated since 1981.

A co-chairman of the unit, Jan Raines, said Montana had been given cage rest in the largest cage available and that students tried to keep him as calm and keep people away from him.

Director of Public Relations Becky Adcock said live rodents and a small pool with fish were placed in the cage so the eagle could still prey and make his own kills.

Timm Otterson, another co-chairman of the unit, said Montana appeared to be a young male, "a teen-ager in our terms."

Otterson said baby eagles are brown and develop a white head and tail as they mature.

Montana still has patches of brown on his head and tail.

As for the other eagle that was spotted Saturday, Tircuit said it was too far away to tell its age.

Montana's future looks good, Tircuit said.

"He'll probably spend the rest of the winter here. In the summer and spring he will fly around looking for a mate. Then, hopefully in the winter, he and his mate will return here and lay their eggs around Christmas time," Otterson said.

Adcock said the Raptor and Wildlife Rehabilitation Unit accepts injured and abandoned wildlife and birds for free and the students who care for them are volunteer vet students.

St. Germain said Louisiana now has about 105 eagle nesting poles, up from only four or five in 1974.

THE ADVOCATE

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