

## Jackson Hole News & Guide

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To catch an eagle

\*Biologist studies raptors to see if they are being poisoned by lead bullets.\*

/By Cory Hatch, Jackson Hole, Wyo./

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In his pickup truck parked off a National Elk Refuge road, Bryan Bedrosian glues together a bird-sized satellite transmitter harness between taking bites of cheese, crackers and homemade elk sausage.

Occasionally, he lifts a pair of binoculars and looks north toward an eagle sitting patiently ? or perhaps petulantly ? in a tree above a gut pile rigged with a device called a net launcher. When and if the bird lands on the pile to feed, Bedrosian will toggle a remote control. The remote, which he cannibalized from a radio-controlled toy car, fires a blank .308 cartridge that propels a net over the bird.

Bedrosian, a biologist with Kelly-based Craighead Beringia South, hopes to attach 10 satellite transceiver backpacks to eagles this hunting season to see if lead bullet fragments from gut piles are poisoning migratory eagles and resident birds.

Catching eagles is tedious work. Before Thanksgiving, Bedrosian spent an entire day watching a gut pile just down the road as more than a dozen eagles waited in the nearby treeline. Not a single bird landed on the trap.

Bedrosian is having similar luck the Monday after Thanksgiving. At about four in the afternoon, he gives up on the lone eagle and drives south toward another trap. He parks on a hilltop about 300 yards away, and scans the area past a line of cottonwood trees. There?s movement on the gut pile, and a large wing flaps above the grass.

?There are two birds sitting on it,? he says.

He toggles the remote and with a crack of gunpowder fires the net launcher.

?We got one of them,? he says, before gunning the engine. In a flash, Bedrosian is down the road, out of his truck, and is running through the sage brush toward the netted eagle, his orange hunting vest flapping in the wind.

By the time I get there, he has the bird pinned to the ground with his knee and is disentangling it from the net. The haste, he says, helps avoid injuries.

?There?s always the possibility of a bird injuring itself or injuring another bird,? he explains.

The eagle is big and powerful with three-inch talons and a sharp, yellow beak, all of which are designed through millions of years of evolution for tearing flesh into pieces. Bedrosian maneuvers the bird in his hands as if it were a toddler throwing a temper tantrum.

The eagle tries to nip at his fingers and hisses in frustration. Bedrosian then carefully eases a leather hood over the bird's eyes with a practiced movement, tightens the straps with his teeth, and the animal calms down almost immediately. Next he wraps the animal in an aba, sort of a straight jacket for birds designed to protect both it and the handler.

The biologist inspects the eagle's crop, a muscular pouch near the throat found in some birds that is used to store food. The crop is bulging, and, on the gut pile I can see a hole in the elk's liver where the bird has been feeding.

"It's been feeding for awhile," he says. "This guy is just gorged."

As a pack of coyotes yelp in the distance, Bedrosian repacks the net launcher, loads another cartridge and places tufts of dried grass around the contraption for camouflage. He shows me a thin, wire antenna wrapped around a sapling that receives the trigger signal from the remote control.

Like almost everything else in this operation, Bedrosian designed the net launcher himself.

"I used to race remote-control cars as a kid," he explains.

His design has even been noticed by researchers working in Europe. In fact, next January, Bedrosian will fly himself and his net launcher to Germany to help a biologist there catch white-tailed sea eagles, a species similar to bald eagles.

Back at the truck, volunteer Jill Learned and Bedrosian work near the tailgate as they attach the satellite transmitter backpack. Half empty trays of elk guts are stacked in the truck along with various other tools used in bird biology: a ruler, a caliper, a scale and a fishing tackle box full of syringes, bird bands, and test tubes. The transmitter itself weighs almost nothing, costs \$2,000, and will send the bird's location every day through a satellite to Bedrosian's computer. After roughly three years, the transmitter ceases to function, the stitches in the leather chest plate deteriorate and the transmitter falls off.

Once the backpack is secure, with about two fingers worth of space between the transmitter and the bird's back, Bedrosian clamps down on the copper fasteners with a pair of needle-nosed pliers and hoists the animal in the air. While the biologist holds its talons, the bird flaps its wings, settling the straps into the bird's feathers for a good fit.

"They're pretty much not going to grow anymore a month or two after leaving the nest," Bedrosian says when I ask if the bird would outgrow its harness.

While I hold the eagle's talons in one hand, Bedrosian then goes to work gathering measurements of the eagle's feet, beak and feathers before taking a blood sample.

He spreads the wing out, searches in the downy feathers for the brachial vein, and plunges in the needle. After two tries, he's got enough to send to the laboratory for the lead tests.

Bedrosian then removes the hood and lets the bird go. It swoops low over the refuge and heads toward the Tetons.

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