

Alaska eagle survives plunge after mating dance

April 10 2010, By RACHEL D'ORO , Associated Press Writer



This Sunday, April 4, 2010 picture provided by Bob Benda, a bird rescuer and biology professor at Prince William Sound Community College, shows a female eagle who fell into the snow in Valdez, Alaska. An acrobatic display of passion proved too much for a pair of eagles engaged in a mating dance in Alaska's Prince William Sound. The surviving female bird is recovering from injuries sustained when the winged couple slammed beak first into a hard snowbank in what her rescuers believe was an aerial courting ritual gone awry. The male died in the impact. (AP Photo/Bob Benda)

(AP) -- An acrobatic display of passion proved too much for a pair of

eagles engaged in a mating dance over Alaska's Prince William Sound.

The female bird is recovering from an injured wing and other injuries sustained when the couple slammed beak-first into a hard snowbank in what her rescuers believe was an aerial courting ritual gone awry. The male [eagle](#) died in the impact, which left the birds buried upside down at least two feet in the snow in the town of Valdez.

It's [mating season](#) for eagles, who perform an elaborate ritual where they clasp talons and spiral toward the ground. This pair probably got caught up in the throes of the moment, said Bob Benda, a bird rescuer and biology professor at Prince William Sound Community College who was among those responding to the Easter Sunday crash.

"They just lose track of what they're doing and don't know how close they are to the ground," he said. "It's raging hormones or something."

But most eagles fling themselves back to reality instead of diving through a crunchy layer of snow. In this case, the male landed next to the female. If the talons had been locked, they were now separated, possibly thrust apart by the velocity of the landing.

Benda said he thought both eagles had died but then noticed the female was breathing. He helped arrange the eagle's transfer to the Anchorage-based Bird Treatment and Learning Center, where she is slowly emerging from shock.

"She is less dazed and confused every day," said Cindy Palmatier, the center's rehabilitation director. "She had this inward stare the first couple days."

Judging by the bird's initial condition, Benda is amazed it's still among the living. The eagle had no broken bones, but she was severely

traumatized, almost in a zombie state.

The day being Easter, Benda took the bird home and figured he would keep her warm and comfortable in a crate in his heated garage until the end came. The next morning, she was still breathing and moving a wing, and by that night, she was being flown to Anchorage.

"I didn't see how she could survive, but now I'm so happy she did," Benda said.

At the rehabilitation center Friday, the eagle's head swiveled back and forth as she checked out some visitors. A few days earlier, she would have paid no attention to them, said Palmatier, who believes her patient suffered head trauma.

The bird also showed no interest in food, but now is eating salmon and caribou meat. And she's been taken off pain medications.

But her left wing visibly droops and Palmatier said if there is significant ligament damage, there's a chance the eagle might not be able to fly again. But it's too early to tell and there's at least a month at the center still to come.

Ultimately, Palmatier hopes the eagle can be released back to the wild in Valdez. She's not too worried about any psychological effects from the loss of the bird's partner.

"I like to say they may mate for life, but they mourn for a moment," Palmatier said. "They get over it pretty quick."

More information: <http://www.birdtlc.net/>

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Citation: Alaska eagle survives plunge after mating dance (2010, April 10) retrieved 11 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-alaska-eagle-survives-plunge.html>

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