

Flightless falcons remain a mystery

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It's still a mystery why Stella and George, two of the three peregrine falcons hatched this spring atop the University of North Dakota water tower in Grand Forks, lost their ability to fly, but it's looking like the story just might have a happy ending.

In the natural world, which can be a darn cruel place, favorable outcomes aren't often the norm.

It all started in early September, when Tim Driscoll, a Grand Forks raptor expert and instructor at the University of Minnesota-Crookston, received a report that Stella - named after Stella Fritzell, a longtime conservationist and state legislator from Grand Forks - had been found on the UND campus unable to fly.

Driscoll, who had banded Stella and siblings George and Anson in July while they were still in the nest, said she'd learned to fly in August and had even been seen and photographed at the lagoons north and west of Grand Forks.

But when he picked her up on the UND campus, she couldn't fly.

Driscoll got Stella to Pam Mortenson, a veterinary technician in Perley, Minn., who kept the bird for a couple of days but could find nothing wrong. Mortenson then drove the peregrine to UMC, where Driscoll was teaching a class. He tried releasing Stella that night in Grand Forks, but she couldn't get off the ground.

"She was hopping around like she wants to fly but just can't do it," Driscoll said in a Sept. 14 Grand Forks Herald story. "It was almost like she had a psychological aversion to flight but nothing wrong."

Driscoll then arranged for Stella's transport to the University of Minnesota Raptor Center in St. Paul, where she spent a couple of weeks rehabilitating and regaining her ability to fly.

Staff at the Raptor Center found nothing wrong with Stella and attributed the loss of flight to some kind of "miscellaneous trauma" that knocked her off-kilter.

Stella then was returned to Grand Forks and released in mid-September below the UND water tower. By all accounts, she's "out in the wild and fine as far as we know," Driscoll said.

At the same time Stella was recovering at the Raptor Center, Driscoll received a report that her brother, George, had turned up at Grand Forks Air Force Base unable to fly. It took some finagling, Driscoll said, but he eventually was able to get permission to retrieve George and arrange for the peregrine's transport to the Raptor Center.

So, the day Stella was returned to Grand Forks for release, George hitched a ride to the Raptor Center.

He's still there recovering, and by all indications, the mystery of the flightless falcons is merely a bizarre coincidence.

Driscoll said he received an update from the Raptor Center. Aside from being underweight, George was eating, doing well and set for transfer to a "flight room," where he'll have space to test his wings and continue to regain his strength for - hopefully - his eventual release.

Because it's so late in the season, Driscoll said George probably would be released in the cities rather than transported back to Grand Forks. Sister Stella likely already has flown south for the winter, he said. Anson, the third peregrine, hasn't been seen in several weeks.

Driscoll named George after Herald founder George Winship and Anson for Anson Northrup, the first person to navigate the Red River by steamboat.

"They said George is small, but he's doing pretty well," Driscoll said. "He did show a little internal trauma. I don't know exactly what that means but they didn't see anything to be alarmed about."

In other words, he should have been able to fly. As with Stella, there didn't appear to be any obvious indication of why he couldn't.

"They didn't find anything, but it is pretty bizarre," Driscoll said.

How this story ends remains to be seen. It's possible that Stella and George will perish in migration never to be seen again. But if they do survive and return to Grand Forks or some other nearby location, we'll probably know next spring by the bands on their legs.

That would be the perfect ending to the mystery of the flightless falcons.

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