

# Vision Quest

*Cataract removal is believed to be the first of its kind in Alaska*

ANCHORAGE EYE DOCTOR GIVES EAGLE NEW CHANCE AT LIFE

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With the patient comfortably anesthetized and breathing well, Dr. James Gaarder of Anchorage cut into the cornea -- the "outer, clear windshield of the eye." The first surgery of its kind in Alaska was under way. The patient, named Digit, is a rarity in the annals of eye surgery -- an adult bald eagle.

As far as Gaarder knew, the surgery he performed on Aug. 2 was the first time a cataract was removed from an eagle here; and he knows of only one other case like it anywhere, Gaarder said Thursday: An eagle cataract was removed at Ohio State University several years ago.

Gaarder, an eye doctor for animals, needs to do one final examination to make sure the bird's once-blind right eye has healed well and vision has returned before he is willing to rule it a complete success.

If all looks good, Digit - so named because of a missing talon - will be released into the wild, said Cindy Palmatier, rehabilitation director of the Bird Treatment and Learning Center in Midtown Anchorage.

Bird TLC, as the center is called, will have ample cause to celebrate Digit's release. When he was brought to the center on March 1, he was ragged, in such poor condition Palmatier thought he was going to be one more eagle they would have to put down.

"He came in effectively blind in the right eye," Palmatier said. In addition, a bone in his right wing was broken, all this plus the missing middle talon on its right foot.

"Wow! Three strikes and you're out," she thought at the time. "He was pretty dehydrated, pretty thin. We had to tube-feed him for a while. It was a fairly long process."

The center brings in 600-800 birds a year, including about 50 eagles. The animals have been sickened by a toxin, mauled by a pet, shot, hit by vehicles, maimed in flight or injured in some other way.

Digit's cataract was "almost certainly" caused by some kind of trauma, in Gaarder's opinion. "Who knows?" Gaarder said. "Maybe the reason it broke its wing was that it couldn't see."

Roughly half of Bird TLC's animals are rehabilitated and released. Most of the rest either die or have to be killed because they're too debilitated to survive.

The eagle release rate is roughly 40 percent, said Rachel Morse, the Bird TLC executive director.

Digit -- Palmatier is "relatively certain" the bird is a male -- was found flightless at the Anchorage landfill, a "dump bird," she called it. The eagle is at least 5, which is the age at which eagles get their adult plumage, the characteristic white feathered hood and dark wings. Its true age is unknown.

In captivity, eagles can live to be 40.

Gaarder (pronounced GOR-der) examined Digit and said the cataract was operable. "He said, 'Let me know if he heals,' " Palmatier recalled.

Heal he did. Wrapped up firmly for weeks on end, the wing fracture mended while the bird was kept in a raptor cage, which is the size of a small walk-in closet.

On July 4, Digit was well enough to move to center flight pens at Fort Richardson. Birds there have healed well enough to test their wings in coops 90 feet long, 30 feet wide and 20 feet high.

Early this month, Gaarder operated on Digit. Palmatier and her husband, veterinarian Todd Palmatier, administered the anesthesia -- "drugs that are as good as what you or I would get," Gaarder said.

From anesthesia to sutures, the operation took all of 30 minutes, he said.

Gaarder, who's 44 and grew up in North Dakota, said he always loved both science and animals and developed a compelling interest in the eye.

"I've performed cataract surgery in dogs, cats, horses, birds and a variety of zoo and wild animals. I've removed cataracts in a robin, a crow and a pigeon. I've removed cataracts in an African roan antelope. I've removed cataracts from rabbits."

Humans who undergo cataract surgery are generally given a prosthetic lens. Some animals also are given the synthetic lenses. But not Digit. No one yet makes prosthetic lenses for eagles, Gaarder said.

The eagle's retina, he knew, was in fine shape. So long as light can hit the retina -- and with the opaque lens removed, it can -- the eagle has vision.

Not perfect sight, but sight nonetheless.

"Functional vision -- that's what we're after," Gaarder said. "They're not reading an eye chart."

Palmatier is certain the eagle can now see from its right eye. During an exam after the surgery, Palmatier's hand made a motion close to the right side of the eagle's head. The bird turned sharply and snapped at her, she said.

"There's no way he could have seen that with his left eye," Palmatier said.

After two weeks of "cage rest," Digit is back at the Fort Richardson flight pens.

"He has to prove to me that he can fly, hit his landings, and fly comfortably," Palmatier said. "He was flying very well, hitting the perches. His stamina is quite good. The wing looks great."

If Gaarder gives the all-clear, Digit will be set free on Sept. 8 at the site of the former Rabbit Hutch restaurant on Old Seward Highway, a spot with a view of Potter March and the waters of Cook Inlet. It should look like home to him.

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ERIK HILL / Anchorage Daily News

Digit, an adult bald eagle that had cataract surgery to restore vision in its right eye, is scheduled to be released from the Bird Treatment and Learning Center after six months of care on Sept. 8.

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