

Apogee Photo Magazine



Anne's Story...

The Release of an Eagle

by Anne Westfall

Be sure to read "The Lone Survivor" by Noella Ballenger.

[Printer Friendly Version](#)

Have you ever wondered how it would feel to get up close and personal with a Golden Eagle? It's an incredible experience and life changing moment that you just have to share with others.

Martin Tyner, a wildlife rehabilitator and educator and founder of the Southwest Wildlife Foundation in Cedar City, Utah, has the opportunity to experience that feeling on a daily basis by, if at all possible, preparing the sick, injured or orphaned eagles for their return to the wild.

But it doesn't end there. He also relishes in sharing those moments with others.

I, my husband Stan and close friend, Noella Ballenger had met Martin on a previous excursion to the foundation. We observed the reverence and respect shown between a man and these birds of prey, their remarkable interaction and noticed how these birds appear to have complete trust in Martin as their handler. It is awesome and awe inspiring all at the same time!

After that first visit, we all knew that one visit would never be enough, so we planned a one-day visit in mid-June to see them again, their birds of prey and to do some photographing in and around the Parowan Valley, with Martin as our guide. Martin said to arrive "early" and to meet him and his wife Susan on the main highway next to a 23 acre property that was donated to the foundation, because he had something for us to do.

After arriving at our designated meeting area, we followed Martin, Susan and their friend Bonnie Bell up the canyon towards Cedar Breaks, turned off the main road and wound up the side of the mountain to a flat area, which overlooked Cedar City and the Parowan Valley.

My unknowing adventure comes to life!

Martin gathered us around him and said, "I need a volunteer, because we have a duty to perform." And I, Anne, was chosen to be the volunteer. Then came the

announcement from Martin - he was ready to release a Golden Eagle back into the wild and I was being given the distinction of performing this task!

This particular eagle had injured his right shoulder and had been covered in lice when he came to Martin. He healed the wing and rid him of the lice over a 6 week span and now it was time for his journey home.

Noella and Stan would be photographing the event, and Bonnie Bell, a Special Agent with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, would be officially overseeing all that occurred.

As soon as he opened the back of his car and gently lifted the Golden Eagle from its cage, I began to tremble with excitement and anticipation. The eagle had a hood covering its eyes, but he was not restrained in any way. Martin moved swiftly and deftly to transfer the bird from his arms to mine, laying the bird against my chest, facing out, so that his back feathers rested against my chest, while his head (still hooded) was placed 2 inches below my chin. Martin confidently wrapped my hands around each leg and told me to hold on tight. He explained that the one thing I did not want to do was let go of either leg – each set of talons, which were as large as the fingers on my hands, can grip with the force of approximately 600 pounds per square inch. OUCH!



Copyright 2007 Noella Ballenger

Martin Tyner handing the Golden Eagle to Anne and making sure her hands were in the right position.

Martin went on to say that I should not lift the bird any higher on my chest - “An eagle can rip your nose off in just a few seconds!” Oh great, I thought to myself! But I was so transfixed with the beauty of the bird that I completely lost my fear.

Once the eagle was securely in my grasp, Martin led us out to the railing. He counseled: when I was ready he wanted me to “chuck” (or throw) the bird as high into the air and as forcefully as I possibly could (sort of like throwing a basketball to make a basket) in order to release him.

The eagle didn't weigh much, maybe 4-5 pounds, and he wasn't any bigger around than a five pound sack of sugar. His golden mantle of feathers stretched from the tip of his head



Copyright 2007 Stan Westfall

Anne holding the Golden Eagle moments before releasing it.

him. He remained docile in my arms and did not struggle to break free, but he seemed to sense what might be coming next.

A moment or two before I released him I was filled with a warm glow from the top of my head to the tips of my toes and I knew I wouldn't fail him. I took a deep breath, said a silent prayer for the eagle to remain free and to thrive and then I released him.

Martin cried out a Paiute Indian expression, "Hoe!"

As the eagle spread its expansive wings, he flew straight down through some Juniper bushes. Then as he soared off the edge of the mountain, he caught a thermal updraft which carried him up the canyon to our right and off towards Cedar Breaks National Monument.

What a thrill it was to see him fly away! At that moment I was filled with the most incredible feeling and the most intense release of emotion that I have ever felt in my lifetime. As I turned to face the people standing near, I felt tears of joy running down my face.

and down the back of his neck and his upper chest. They were exquisite. The light of the sun was perfectly reflected in those long delicate golden feathers. He stretched about 3 feet in length, with a wing span of at least 5 feet.

Now, I'm a short person, only five feet two inches tall, and the railing in front of me stood at least four feet tall, so I'm thinking to myself, what if I miss and the bird doesn't clear the railing - I took no time to dwell on the negative. When we were in position, Martin told me that he was going to remove the hood. He asked me to remain calm, though I was shaking like a leaf. He told me to let the eagle take in the scene in front of him and when I felt ready, I should thrust him into the air and we'd hope for the best.

As soon as the hood was removed, the eagle slowly turned his head from side to side, taking a good look at the scenery in front of



Copyright 2007 Stan Westfall

Anne "chucking" the Golden Eagle in the air.



Copyright 2007 Stan Westfall

The eagle flies.

Martin then told us that the Paiute Indians revere the Golden Eagle as the symbol of their tribe and that they had bequeathed upon him a Paiute Indian name which means “Healer of the Eagles.” He said that the Paiutes believe that it is the eagle’s mission in life to gather the prayers of each person on earth or the equivalent of one prayer per feather.

An adult eagle has 7,000 feathers. When an eagle is released back into the wild, he will carry the prayers of the people up to heaven to God. “So,” Martin said to me, “Anne, you are the last human being to touch the eagle and you have sent him on his way to deliver 7,000 prayers to our Father in Heaven.” I was speechless, humbled and awestruck by what had just happened.

What an honor and a privilege it was to be a volunteer that morning – a morning that will remain etched in my heart and mind forever.



Copyright 2007 Noella Ballenger

“It was a moment that I will never forget!”

Noella Ballenger leads photographic workshop/tours to special locations in the West. Visit her site in Apogee Photo Magazine at www.noellaballenger.com or send her an e-mail at Noella1B@aol.com Write to her at P.O. Box 457, La Canada, CA 91012, call: (818) 954-0933 or fax: (818) 954-0910 for more information on her workshop/tours.

