



**Warren Johnson (right) found this eagle crippled deep in Montana's Absaroka Mountains. He came to its rescue with his lasso before sending it on to Jordan Spyke (left) and the crew at the Montana Raptor Conservation Center.**



# WRANGLING A RAPTOR

by Jeannie Counce

*When outfitter Warren Johnson came upon an injured golden eagle while chasing elk in the backcountry, his solution was simple:*

*“I decided I would rope her.”*

This past November, with hunting season in full swing, Warren Johnson, owner of Hell’s A Roarin’ Outfitters near Jardine, Montana, was headed into the forest with a group of hunters and a string of horses. The group was in search of big bulls deep in the Absaroka Mountains just north of Yellowstone National Park.

“Just days before I’d spotted one of the largest herds I’ve seen,” says Johnson, whose operation is situated on the main migratory route for the northern Yellowstone herd. “There must have been 900 elk.”

As snow piles deep inside the park, the herds head north, following the Yellowstone River toward winter range in the Paradise Valley, much of which the RMEF has helped protect. Along the way the elk often pause to feed at a flat open spot in the Gallatin National Forest, a place surrounded by steep hills scattered with stands of Douglas fir. This was the destination of Johnson and his group that early morning.

“As we approached, we could hear cows and calves calling back and forth,” Johnson says. “Even though the rut was over, a couple of bulls were bugling.” Despite hearing these primal animal conversations thousands of times, Johnson says, “They still make the hair on the back of my neck stand up.”

Over the past 30 years Johnson and his clients have had the opportunity to appreciate and harvest their share of trophy animals, including two over 400 inches. Warren’s father Vern moved to the area in 1932 and still saddled up and worked as an outfitter well into his 80s.

## First Look

As they slipped closer to the herd, Johnson spotted a female juvenile golden eagle on the ground.

"At first I thought she had been feeding on a carcass and was just too full to fly," he says. "But when she tried to take off, I could see her wing was drooping."

Johnson noted it all. But he was hunting elk.

"When I see elk, the rest of the world stops," says Johnson. Unsure of the eagle's condition and with bulls on the brain, he led the group on to the hunt. "We ended up getting a 352-inch bull that day."

The next day, a storm swept through. "It was blizzardy and blowing snow all day. I looked for the

that were legal to shoot, but my client was willing to let them go in hopes of getting a bigger one later."

From the vantage above the bulls, Johnson scanned the edges of the flats and soon found the downed eagle again.

"She was on a steep hill under a tree," he says. "She tried to fly a couple of times, but just flopped."

Knowing the area was accessible only by horseback or snowmobile and the raptor had to be growing weaker, he decided to intervene.

"I told my client I was going to call the game warden to see if it was okay to try to catch it," says Johnson. The Aussie was all in. You can chase elk any day. How many chances do you get to chase an eagle?



**The golden eagle Warren Johnson lassoed wasn't able to fly or hunt and would have almost certainly met her demise in the backcountry without his help.**

eagle but I couldn't see it," says Johnson. "I figured she was hunkered down somewhere."

The following day broke sunny and clear, revealing a fresh blanket of 14 inches of powder on top of the fall snowpack. Johnson and two others—Tiffer, a guide who has worked for him for seven years, and a client from Australia—worked their way toward the flats. They were looking for big lone bulls leaving the park toward lower ground in the wake of the storm. Instead, they spotted a small knot of raghorns and small six-points.

"We snuck around and got above them to get a better look," Johnson says. "There were four or five

## The Catch

"Warren called me to say that he'd spotted a wounded golden eagle and asked if he caught it, could something be done to help it," says Chris Kerin, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) game warden out of Gardiner. "I told him yes, we could get it to the raptor center."

Kerin and other FWP wardens and biologists work closely with the Montana Raptor Conservation Center (MRCC), a Bozeman nonprofit that rehabilitates injured and orphaned raptors with the goal of returning them to the wild.

With the green light to attempt the capture, the

three men rode closer to the injured bird. Feeling pressed, she struggled to fly, but each time she attempted liftoff, she just slumped farther down the steep hill where she had taken cover. Johnson and Tiffer dismounted, left their horses with the Aussie, and tried to close in.

"She was agitated," Johnson says. "She took off stronger than we expected, but her wing was just not functioning."

While they wallowed through thigh-deep snow, the eagle skimmed over the surface. Trying to surround an angry eagle with two people is no mean feat under the best of circumstances. Approaching an injured animal is always risky business—especially a predator with a 7-foot wingspan and talon strength of 1,000 pounds per square inch. For comparison, the average human's maximum gripping strength is right around 100 pounds per square inch, and we don't have razor-sharp talons. It soon turned into a kind of slow-motion rodeo. First the men charged the eagle. Then the eagle charged Tiffer. Catching the bird by hand wasn't looking like a viable option.

"I decided rather than stress her out any more, I would rope her," Johnson says matter-of-factly. For a man who started throwing a rope not long after he could walk and has spent his whole life working with horses and mules, this is a valid alternative. "I didn't

get her the first time," he adds modestly, noting that this was the first eagle he's ever roped. "It took me three tries."

Johnson says he was able to pull off the best-case scenario in golden eagle lassoing, all while the raptor puffed up her feathers and postured to protect herself. "I landed the rope over one wing and the base of her neck," he

recollects. The rope was low enough it wouldn't choke the bird, and secure enough to hold it. Then there was the matter of pulling her in and safely subduing her. Johnson used a light touch.

"I didn't jerk it too hard," he says. "I just gave it some slack—about 40 to 50 feet—while she fought. She used every bit of strength she had."

Eventually, Tiffer was able to work in behind the bird and throw his coat over it, which calmed her considerably.

*"We don't usually encourage people to attempt this sort of thing, but Warren turned out to be a pretty good raptor wrangler."*



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The group was improvising on the fly all the while, but Johnson says after working with animals his whole life, it felt comfortable. They were making commonsense decisions.

"We always have black tape for securing tags on game, so we taped the beak shut and made sure the talons couldn't grab," he recalls. "Once I got her on my horse, I kind of covered her eyes and she got pretty calm. I could tell she was tired."

His freshly broke 4-year-old gelding, Timberline, was not particularly happy about the additional passenger, but bore up as they rode to the Hell's A-Roarin' spread. Once there, the men settled on a dog crate as the best way to secure the eagle. Kerin, the game warden, was out in the field, but a Forest Service biologist was able to pick the crated bird up and ferry it to Gardiner. MRCC staff arrived later that day. They found she had a fractured left radius-ulna. As the 166th raptor admitted to the center in 2014, she was given the moniker GE 166-14.

## *Above and Beyond*

Kerin describes Johnson as a true conservationist, saying simply, "He stepped in and took action."

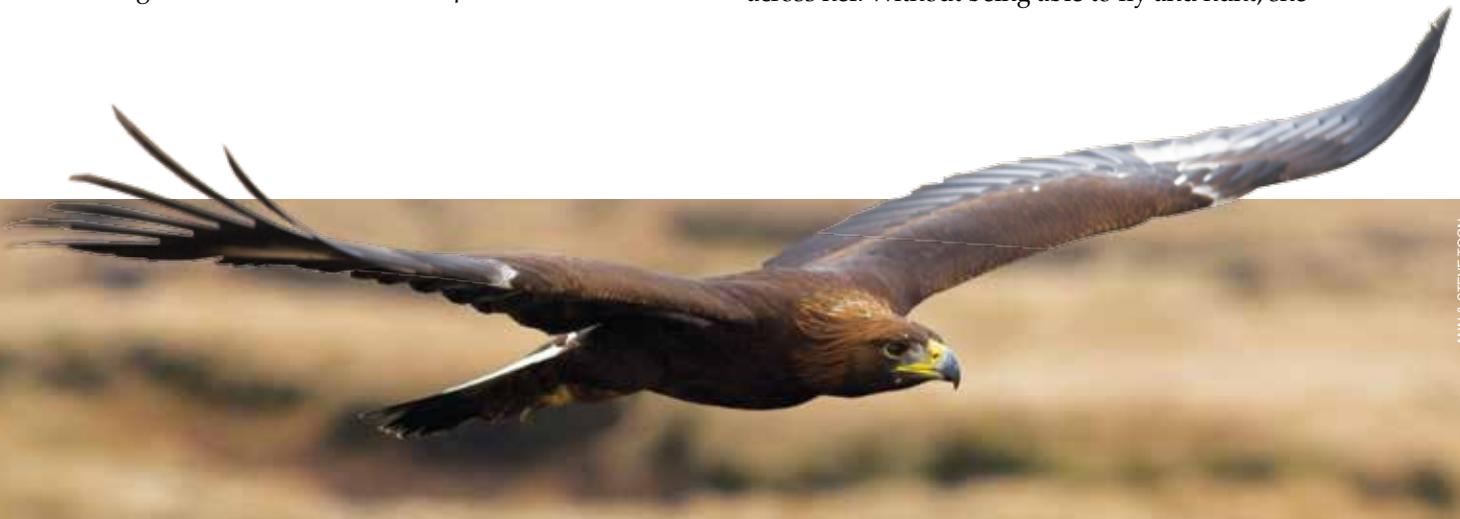
It was an extraordinary rescue, according to Becky Kean, MRCC's director.

"We treat nearly 180 birds of prey each year, but this is the only one that has been lassoed by a hunter in the backcountry and transported to safety on horseback," Kean says.

She and assistant director Jordan Spyke have captured their fair share of downed eagles, hawks, owls and falcons. They know that it's rarely easy.

"We don't usually encourage people to attempt this sort of thing, but Warren turned out to be a pretty good raptor wrangler," Kean jokes.

"Hunters are our eyes and ears in the field. We really appreciate them reporting injured birds, but what he did was amazing," she adds. "This eagle was in a place where not many people would have come across her. Without being able to fly and hunt, she



ANN & STEVE TOON

# GOLDEN EAGLES: NATURE'S GUNSHIP

Golden eagles dive on prey from tremendous heights and have been clocked flying close to 200 miles per hour. For a bird with a wingspan longer than an elk's body, nose to tail, they possess astonishing maneuverability, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. When courting, an eagle will make up to 20 steep dives and upward swoops in a row, beating its wings three or four times at the top of each rise. Single birds and pairs also play with objects such as sticks or dead prey, carrying them high into the sky, then dropping and retrieving them in mid-air.

They build huge stick nests, returning to them season after season. Averaging 5 to 6 feet wide, and 2 feet high, these stick empires can also include antlers, bones and human-made materials such as wire and fence posts. The birds line their nests with everything from yucca to conifer boughs, often softening them with grass, leaves, mosses, lichens or shredded bark. They frequently include aromatic leaves, possibly to keep insects at bay.

Golden eagles prey primarily on jackrabbits, prairie dogs, marmots

and ground squirrels. But they have been observed killing seals, mountain goats, bighorn sheep, deer, pronghorn, coyotes, badgers, bobcats, cranes, swans and domestic sheep. While they mainly attack from above, golden eagles sometimes hunt on the ground, wildly flapping as they run. Not averse to well-aged meat, they often follow ravens and crows to kill sites and scavenge carrion. They also raid nests, steal food from other birds and occasionally catch fish like their white-headed kin.

—Bugle Staff

would not have survived.”

Johnson concedes the whole incident was one of the most unusual things he’s done. “But I knew I wanted to help.”

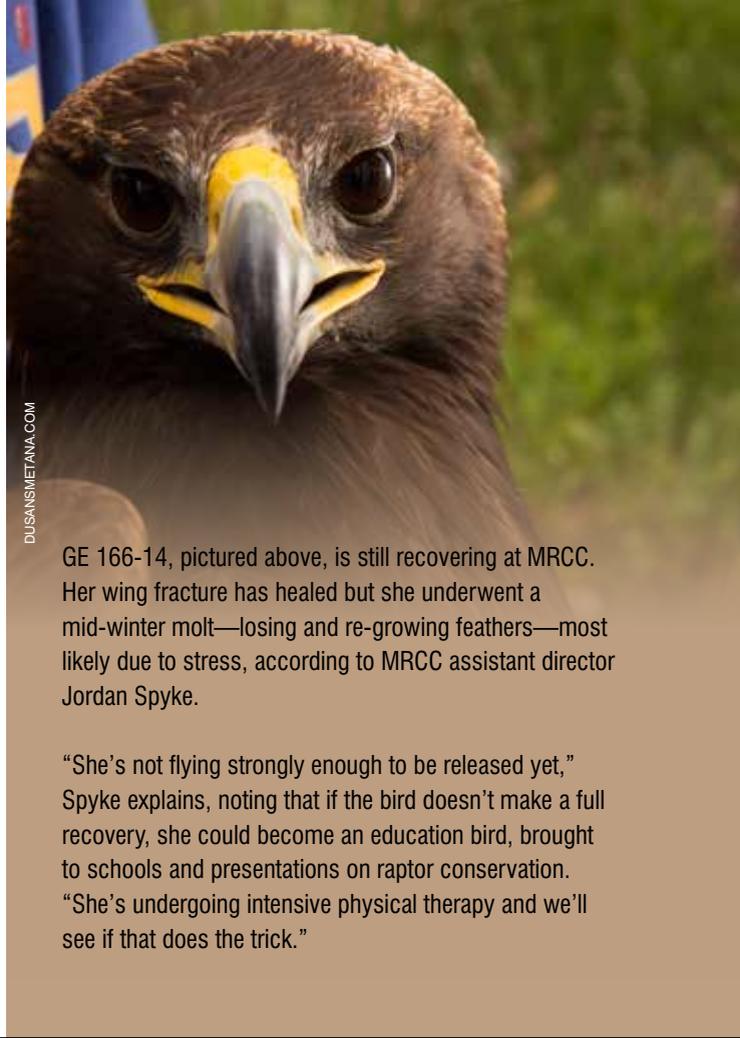
He grew up in the 1960s when eagle populations were in peril.

“When we saw a bald eagle, we used to go get everyone to come look at it because it was so rare,” he says. “I’ve always liked eagles.”

Although eagle populations have rebounded tremendously from those times, both bald and golden eagles remain federally protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Act, and are still vulnerable. Nearly 70 percent of recorded golden eagle deaths are attributable to human impact, either intentional or inadvertent. The most common sources of injuries and death are collisions with cars, wind turbines and other structures; electrocution from power lines; and poisoning from consuming bait intended to control nuisance animals or lead ammunition from gutpiles and carcasses of animals shot by hunters.

Kerin salutes Johnson for his actions.

“He took the time to give back to nature and wildlife by rescuing an animal that could have hurt him,” the warden says. “He even called to make sure it was okay. All that shows good character.”



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GE 166-14, pictured above, is still recovering at MRCC. Her wing fracture has healed but she underwent a mid-winter molt—losing and re-growing feathers—most likely due to stress, according to MRCC assistant director Jordan Spyke.

“She’s not flying strongly enough to be released yet,” Spyke explains, noting that if the bird doesn’t make a full recovery, she could become an education bird, brought to schools and presentations on raptor conservation. “She’s undergoing intensive physical therapy and we’ll see if that does the trick.”

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Johnson shrugs off the praise.

"Everyone has their own standard of what's fair chase, and FWP has a definition," he says. "My idea goes beyond that. I never want to take this area and the wildlife that lives here for granted. I feel lucky to be here every day, and I want to give back more than I take."

Johnson isn't just talking the talk. He volunteers for FWP and Forest Service projects to maintain and improve wild places and spends two to three weeks each summer spraying noxious weeds in the forest, because "without good grass range, there's no elk." He has also packed beaver into the wilderness to establish colonies and helped to relocate bighorn sheep as part of regional wildlife management efforts. "Whenever they need help, I volunteer my services," he says.

Roping GE 166-14 and getting her medical assistance just comes with the territory. "It's all part of nature and the ecosystem," Johnson says. "I respect the eagle as much as the elk."

*Jeannie Counce lives and works in Bozeman, Montana. When she's not writing about health care for her day job, she volunteers with the Montana Raptor Conservation Center.*

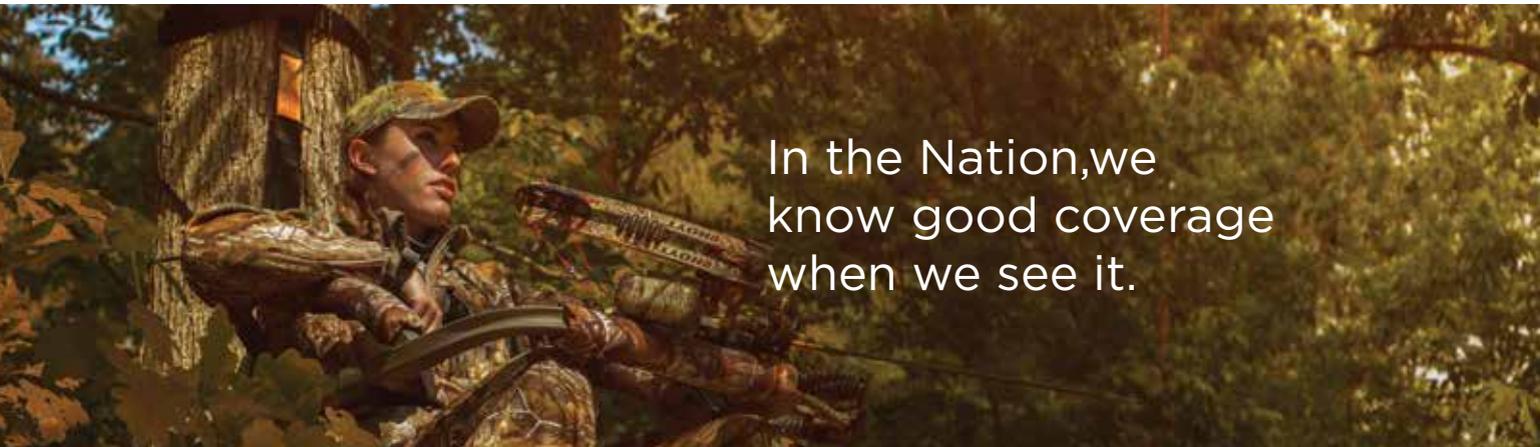


ALLEN RUSSELL

## MAKE THE CALL: REPORT INJURED WILDLIFE

If you come upon an injured raptor or other animal in the woods, do not try to catch it. Instead contact the local office of the state fish and game agency and ask for the phone number of a licensed wildlife rehabilitation center nearby.

If you are hunting in Montana, add Montana Raptor Conservation Center to your phone, 406-585-1211. This nonprofit organization rehabilitates injured birds of prey from across the state, and is ready to come to the rescue.



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