



The article *Eagle Training to go Back to the Wild* was written by Matt Lazier and published in the **San Luis Obispo County Telegram-Tribune**, Saturday, March 21, 1998 page B-1,2

The Eagle has landed. Repeat: The eagle has landed. Unfortunately, he hasn't been able to take off again. But, he soon will soar again, thanks to the rehabilitative efforts of some local folks.

Two North County volunteers for Pacific Wildlife Care have spent five months caring for Samson, a nine-pound, 10-year-old golden eagle whose home is the Santa Margarita Ranch. Samson came into the volunteers' care in November after nine of his 12 tail feathers were torn out by an unknown assailant.

"We suspect it was a coyote or a badger," said Brad Felger, an Atascadero falconer and horseshoer who has taken care of the eagle since December.

Whatever attacked Samson did a thorough job of grounding him.

"Eagles are soaring birds," Felger said. "The tail feathers are what they use to get a lift and soar. Also, the feathers are an eagle's rudder for turning."

The assault left Samson with no ability to take off, leading his rehabilitators to name him after the biblical character whose strength was sapped by a haircut.

A Santa Margarita ranch resident reported Samson's plight to Charlotte Madsen, who's worked 13 years as a volunteer with Pacific Wildlife Care, which rehabilitates injured wild animals from San Luis Obispo and northern Santa Barbara counties. Armed with a bird-carrier, gloves, towels and a net, the small, spry woman went in search of a bird that couldn't fly, but could run very fast.

Madsen said the caller initially was put off by her age and stature. (Madsen, a retiree, declined to give her age. She's about 5 feet tall.)

"She looked at me and didn't think it was possible." The two chased Samson around the ranch for an hour until he was exhausted and sought safety in a patch of brush. There, Madsen easily caught him.

"I picked him up by the feet," Madsen said, "wrapped a towel around him and walked him to the car."

She took Samson to a veterinarian to make sure the eagle was healthy. She was particularly concerned about lead poisoning, a problem among many birds of prey volunteers from Pacific Wildlife Care have seen recently. The birds are poisoned by eating other animals that have been shot, Madsen said, and most die from the effects of the lead.

After Samson passed his physical, Pacific Wildlife and Fish and Game people agreed he would be sent to falconer Felger. The bird takes his ease in an aviary behind the house, dining on rabbit and chicken and biding his time until he can fly again. Since he now only flies the six-foot stretch between perches in his aviary, Samson is healthy, but out of shape. Were he to be released into the wild now, Felger said, he might not survive.

Once Samson's last four tail feathers begin to grow in, Felger will start a month-long regimen of conditioning. He will take Samson to Santa Margarita Ranch where the bird will fly for 100 to 150 feet on a tether, with which Felger can gently pull him back to the ground.

"This is the best way to get him into shape," Felger said. "The first 100 feet or so is the working part of an eagle's flight. He will really get heavy duty exercise."

Felger said this is a good way to recondition Samson, because it does not train him to come to people or food. These steps to keep Samson wild will help ensure his survival.

"He would rather be away from everybody," Felger said. "If he were unreleasable, I would tame him down so he wouldn't hurt himself. But he can fly again."

For the moment, Samson can only eat and exercise his patience. While five of his tail feathers have grown back, giving him a grand total of eight, he is still four shy of a full set. The trauma of having those feathers ripped out may have scarred the bird's follicles shut.

Removal of scar tissue will be explored with a veterinarian. Then, Samson will need to wait until the remaining four feathers have grown back at least halfway before he can be released. Felger said the whole process could take a month or more.

Felger, a professional horseshoer has been a licensed falconer for 27 years. In 10 years as a volunteer with Pacific Wildlife Care, he had cared for many birds of prey. But Samson is his first eagle. He is Madsen's first, too, in more than a decade of animal rehabilitation experience.

"I have been thrilled to have him," Madsen said. "I have taken care of birds for many years, and now I can say I have cared for everything from tiny birds to eagles."

Pacific Wildlife Care is a nonprofit, volunteer organization with animal rehabilitators located throughout the county. The group relies on donations from members and others to feed and care for injured animals until their release. Animals that cannot be returned to the wild are turned over to zoos.