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San Francisco Zoo's southern California Bald Eagle recovering Program comes to a close

22-year program records 103 eagle chicks hatched and released into the wild

Following 22 years of extensive California bald eagle research, breeding, field study and restoring the species' population, the San Francisco Zoo has announced it is concluding its California Bald Eagle Recovery Program in southern California. On Monday June 18, the Zoo's remaining nine adult bald eagles (5 females and 4 males) will fly on the wings of a special FedEx cargo jet to the birds' new home at the American Eagle Foundation (AEF) in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee.

Established in 1985, the Zoo's California Bald Eagle Recovery Program primary objective has been to assist in restoring bald eagles in California by providing stock for reintroduction to the wild. The program served as the only large-scale captive breeding program for bald eagles in the western United States and was a major focus of the Zoo's Avian Conservation Center. Currently about 60 bald eagles live on the Channel Islands; in the last two years seven chicks have hatched naturally. Starting in 1991, bald eagles raised at the Zoo were reintroduced to Santa Catalina Island. This reintroduction program was then expanded in 2002 to include releases on Santa Cruz Island.

"The San Francisco Zoo is honored to have been associated with the recovery of the bald eagle in California and thrilled to know that these birds will continue to help the species recovery efforts in the southern United States," said John Aikin, director of conservation at the Zoo. "We are extremely proud of the Zoo's Avian Conservation Center staff, who have performed vitally important work including research, field study, breeding and species management. It has been a thrilling and humbling experience for all of those involved."

The eagles' transfer comes at a time when the United States government and conservation groups alike are focused on the national bird's comeback and they are anticipating their "delisting" from Endangered Species Act protection. Today, California is home to an estimated 200 pairs of nesting bald eagles. Throughout the lower 48 states there are nearly 10,000 nesting pairs, a 50 percent increase since 2000.

The San Francisco Zoo's eagle conservation program has been part of an active partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the nonprofit Institute for Wildlife Studies, and the Montrose Settlements Restoration Program, a coalition that includes three state and three federal agencies.

"The San Francisco Zoo has been a wonderful wildlife partner in restoring our national symbol," said Steve Thompson, California-Nevada operations manager for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. "The Zoo has again demonstrated how partners, in cooperation with the Service, are a key to restoring healthy wildlife populations."

The Zoo is also an active participant in the Association of Zoo and Aquariums (AZA) Species Survival Plan (SSP) program. As an essential part of modern zoo management, SSPs are formal national and international breeding programs that manage the number, demographics and genetic diversity of our captive populations.