

Challenger

This eagle's remarkable journey provides inspiration.

You may have heard about Challenger, the famous non-releasable, free-flying celebrity bald eagle under care of the American Eagle Foundation (<http://www.eagles.org/challenger.html>).

Challenger never learned how to find food for himself, but he sure knows how to "open doors."

Challenger's Humble Beginnings

Challenger's adventures began in April 1989 when a storm blew this tiny eaglet from his nest in southern Louisiana. After he saw well-meaning rescuers feeding and nursing him back to health, he concluded that humans were his only food source. He never learned to fish for himself.

In August 1989, he was found emaciated and too weak to fly at a Corps of Engineers Recreational area on upper Percy Priest Lake. An unknown long-haired gentleman, of about 35 years age, picked him up and delivered him to the nearby Smyrna police station (we would still welcome hearing from him about details of that discovery).

The police dispatcher called Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency's Danny Montgomery on his off-day at home, and advised that someone had found a downed "big hawk." Danny was then a heavy equipment operator on Percy Priest Wildlife Management Area, and currently is assistant manager of TWRA's Stones River Shooting Range. When Danny arrived at the police station, the long-haired man was carefully holding the bird against his body with his hands holding its legs, just above the feet. Danny quickly judged the bird too big to be a hawk. It also had the

by Bob Hatcher

brown head and tail of an immature bald eagle.

When they stepped outside to place the eagle in Danny's large pet carrier, the eagle started flapping his wings. One of eagle's feet slipped out of the grasp of the man's hand. After the talons quickly sank into the upper forearm of the man, the blood



photo courtesy of the Miami Dolphins

(above) Challenger flies prior to a Tennessee Titans and Miami Dolphins game in Florida.

quickly flowed while the man tried to remain calm. Danny tried to pry the talons loose with his hands, but the eagle just applied more pressure

next to arteries on the underside of the forearm.

Danny then recalled that a TWRA colleague, Pat McInturff, had once commented that if you place a stick by the feet of a raptor, it will usually grab the stick, making it safer to grab its "ankle" area. Danny got a stick out of his truck and placed it alongside the man's bleeding arm. The eagle quickly withdrew his talons from the man's arm and grabbed the stick. Danny placed the eagle in his large pet carrier in the back of his truck. He placed a tarp over most of the carrier, leaving space for air, after which the eagle was calm. Danny then reported this eagle finding and its band number to me at TWRA in Nashville.

I advised him to deliver the eagle to the care of Al Cecere and John Stokes at the nearby Cumberland Wildlife Foundation, now the American Eagle Foundation (AEF). Danny's gentle rescue of the eagle (and the man's) probably helped Challenger to later feel more comfortable around people, when he would help "open some doors" for eagles and other wildlife.

After learning from the federal Bird Banding Laboratory that this first-year eagle had been released from a hack site in northeast Alabama, I called my colleague, Dr. Joe Meyers of the Alabama Department of Conservation. Joe commented, "Well, I knew someone would report that eagle down on the ground, again. After it was found nearly starved in Iowa, we fattened him up again and released him a second time, just eight days ago. He flew directly to a fisherman and successfully begged a fish from him."

Opens Doors

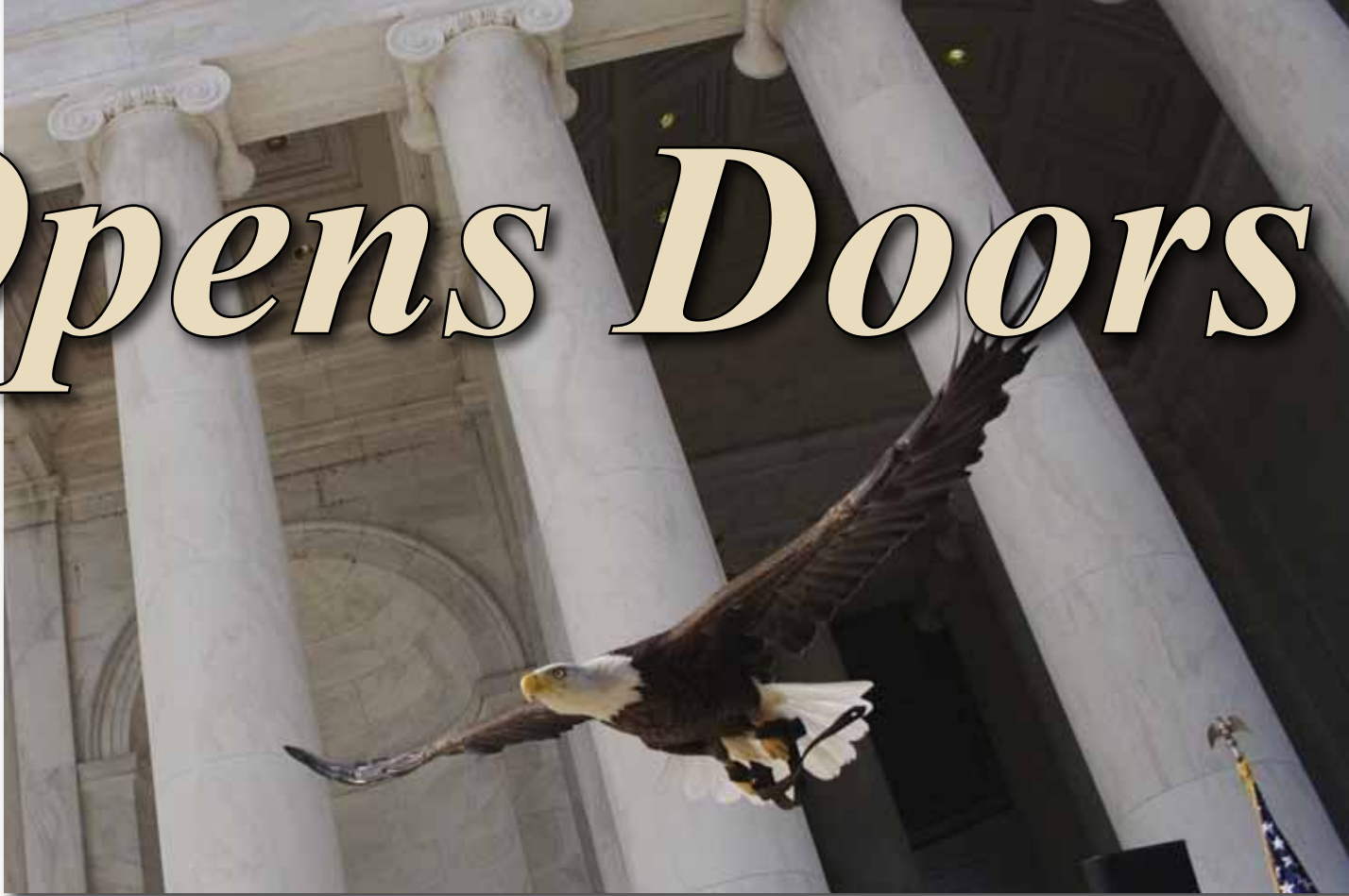


photo courtesy of the USFWS

We knew then the eagle would never learn to hunt for himself in the wild. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service agreed, and in 1991 designated that it remain at AEF.

Challenger Learns How to Soar Like a Super Eagle

Al Cecere and his AEF staff noticed that Challenger felt comfortable around people. They trained him to help gain public support for bald eagles which were then listed as endangered. This meant that bald eagles were in danger of becoming extinct as a species.

AEF and its 20-plus non-releasable bald eagles moved to Pigeon Forge by early 1991. This move was thanks to the generous facilities provided by entertainer Dolly Parton and her Dollywood entertainment park, with the support of Dollywood's super-entertainer and eagle enthusiast James Rogers.

During the next few years, Challenger moved from mere display at public events to regularly flying in an indoor music theater in Pigeon Forge. He then began free-flying at outdoor events such as Indian

pow-wows and NASCAR races. His "eagle-eyes" and food were always his secret for flying back to his handler in crowds of thousands. In 1996, he graduated from several exhibitions at Atlanta Brave major league baseball games to free-flying before 80,000 people at the Paralympics Games in Atlanta. He soon flew at an Atlanta Braves game and the Braves' yearbook later depicted as a highlight of the team's year. The Braves also won the National League pennant that year.

During 1996-2008, Challenger has averaged flying at over 21 major sporting and convention events per year. This includes 121 college and pro sporting events. He has flown at five World Series, twice at the Fiesta Bowl, three NFL All-Pro games in Honolulu, the NCAA Men's Final Four basketball tournament. New York Yankees' owner George Steinbrenner later wrote Al Cecere, "Watching Challenger fly, I was prouder to be an American than at any other time in my life. I thought I might 'burst' with pride." During 1996 through 2008, Challenger has flown during opening ceremonies of

(above) Challenger is soaring near the Jefferson Memorial, in Washington, D.C., during the ceremony delisting the bald eagle from threatened status on June 28, 2007.

153 national conferences and conventions, where he meets with many fellow celebrities. These events have

www.Eagles.org

"opened the hearts" of thousands who can "open doors" for eagles and other wildlife.

After her students saw Challenger fly during the National Anthem of a World Series game on TV, a Michigan middle school teacher wrote AEF that her "students' minds became like little sponges, soaking up all they could learn about eagles".

After Challenger's flight during the National Anthem of a college football game, a grandmother from Stillwater, Okla. wrote AEF, "Even though I was unable to attend the



photo courtesy of the USFWS

Oklahoma State vs. Texas game, I heard that Challenger stole the show. Challenger's appearance meant more than anyone could ever imagine. He will always hold a special place in our hearts." She also wanted a recommendation for an eagle book for her grandchildren, which we appropriated suggested, *Challenger: America's Favorite Eagle*, which is available at AEF's online gift shop at <http://www.eagles.org/merchandise.html>. Thousands have also been touched by the video and song, "When Challenger Flies", as seen at web site, <http://www.eagles.org/aefsplash/>. Challenger's image is also on a Tennessee special license plate, that helps fund eagle programs at AEF (see <http://www.eagles.org/saveeagle.html>).

Audubon Magazine (February 2006) reported, "*Challenger has flown from the U.S. Capitol three times. At a rally to raise funding for state wildlife protection programs, more than 1,000 people stood on the Capitol steps as he glided above them during the national anthem. 'So many of us were crying,' says Naomi Edelson, an environmentalist in Washington and a champion of one of Cecere's pet causes: increased funding to state wildlife programs.*

Al (with Challenger) is the most effective lobbyist I've worked with in my 10 years of doing it.' Many of the conservatives photographed with Challenger threw their support behind \$400 million over the next six years to State Wildlife Grants, a program popular largely because it can preempt the stringent endangered species designation." Congress has allocated \$548 million for State Wildlife Grants for fiscal years 2001-08.

Bald Eagle Recovery and Delisting

Challenger and Al Cecere backed President Bill Clinton in the White House in 1999, when the President proposed that the bald be delisted from Threatened status (they had been downlisted from Endangered in 1995) They backed the Secretary of Interior at the Jefferson Memorial on June 28, 2007. That's when the bald eagle was finally delisted and transferred to protection of the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Delisting was deserved due to the recent progress made by bald eagle populations, but actually created a problem. After delisting, they would still need support, or they might have to return to protection of the Endan-

gered Species Act. Yet, delisting would give them much lower priority for continued funding for their needed monitoring and conservation. Al Cecere knew something needed to be done and that Challenger could help.

Bald Eagle Commemorative Coins

Challenger probably opened more doors for eagles than ever in late 2004. Al Cecere conceived an idea to raise \$10 million for bald eagle recovery projects. It would be through the U.S. Mint's sale of commemorative coins after the bald eagle goes off the endangered species list. Al perched his nationally known celebrity on his arm and began a seven and a half day marathon. He made unannounced visits to most Congressional offices and all 100 Senate offices of Capital Hill. Startled receptionists would announce, "Excuse me Senator, but there is a bald eagle here to see you". Al and Challenger were able to personally visit with 40 senators and with the staff of all the rest. Almost all these 40 senators and many House members asked to have a picture taken with Challenger, many for publishing on their web sites. Tennessee's Senator Lamar

(opposite page) Al Cecere, Challenger and Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne at the Bald Eagle delisting ceremony



photo courtesy of the Texas Rangers.

(above) Challenger is released high above the crowds at a Texas Rangers' game.

(left) Al Cecere and Challenger in Chicago preparing for an appearance at a baseball game.



photo courtesy of the American Eagle Foundation

Alexander, a co-sponsor of the bill in the Senate, reported, "I received a call from a senior member of the Senate, Robert Byrd, who said, 'I have an eagle in my office. May I co-sponsor the bill? Now, Senator Byrd had never called my office before.'"

Bill Frist, the Senate majority leader at the time from Tennessee, stated on the Senate floor, "No Senate or House member can say no to that beautiful bird, that beautiful symbol of the United States of America." Why, it would have been tantamount to booing "The Star-spangled Banner."

*The AEF
celebrates its
25th anniversary in
2010.*

Indeed no House or Senate member said "no" to Challenger. The Bald Eagle Commemorative Coin Act of 2004 passed UNANIMOUSLY in BOTH the House and Senate. President Bush signed it into law on Dec. 23, 2004, just before it would have been too late.

Congress authorized the U.S. Mint to create and market gold, silver, and clad coins in \$5, \$1, and 50 cents pieces. They honored Challenger by placing his image and name on the 50 cents coin. They were minted and sold in 2008, which helped celebrate the 35th anniversary of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. These commemorative coins also celebrate the recent delisting of the Bald Eagle and will raise funds for post-delisting conservation of bald eagles.

The American Eagle Fund

A surcharge from the sale of each coin is earmarked to create a special American Eagle Fund. This Fund grew to over \$8 million during 2008 for support of bald eagle projects nationwide. Coin sales ended at the U.S. Mint in December 2008 but will continue online at the American Eagle Foundation (www.eagles.org).

Congress has asked that this Fund be administered by the American Eagle Foundation (see web site, http://www.eagles.org/articles/PR_1_4_08.htm). AEF has contracted with an endowment firm to manage the Fund. If the economy allows the endowment to grow sufficiently by July 2010,

AEF could hopefully begin to accept applications for competitive grants from this Fund. The grants will support bald eagle projects by state wildlife agencies and other conservation organizations, preferably beginning in 2011. AEF has selected a 12-person team of nationwide eagle experts for its Bald Eagle Grant Advisory Team (BEGAT). They will help AEF rate grant applications in accordance with criteria that they have already established. It is no wonder that *Audubon Magazine* placed Challenger's picture on their front cover (February, 2006), with the caption, "Don't Mess with This Bird!" (see <http://magazine.audubon.org/content/content0601.html>).

Bob Hatcher served as Nongame & Endangered Wildlife Coordinator with the Tennessee Wildlife Resources Agency during 1978-2001. Since March 2001, he has been an eagle consultant to the American Eagle Foundation and responds to eagle-related inquiries addressed to AEF's web site at EagleMail@eagles.org. He serves as national chairman of AEF's Bald Eagle Grant Advisory Team (BEGAT). He resides in Brentwood, Tenn.