

CHAPTER 1

Addle the Eggs

United States Department of the Interior
Fish and Wildlife Service

Certified Mail: 7007-0220-0002-2300-0294
Mr. Peter Dubacher
April 7, 2010

Mr. Dubacher:

This letter is in response to your letter dated March 19, 2010 . . . reporting the laying of an eagle egg and to advise you that the authorities of the Eagle Exhibition permit MB818303 does not allow propagation; therefore, you must addle all eggs laid by the eagles in your care. . . .

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) delisted the bald eagle under the Endangered Species Act in 2007. . . . Since (on a nationwide basis), the bald eagle has recovered from the threat of extinction . . . there is no longer a need to propagate eagles.

. . . It is your responsibility to ensure that the eagles kept under your stewardship do not reproduce. . . . Continued reproduction may result in the loss of some or all of the privileges of your permit.

April of 2010 was a busy month for both good and ill, in places both near and far from my home in upstate New York. In world

news, environmental disaster dominated, most evident in the BP oil spill. On April twentieth, the BP/Transocean drilling rig Deepwater Horizon exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, killing eleven people. A blowout preventer, intended to stop the release of crude oil, failed to activate, and the waters of the Gulf started filling up with poison at a rate of approximately 250,000 gallons of oil per day.

By the end of April, wildlife experts were predicting disaster for the coast of Louisiana, which has about 40 percent of the country's wetlands. The brown pelican, recently taken off the endangered list, along with many other birds at the height of their breeding and nesting season, were at risk. Disaster was also anticipated for Louisiana's fishing industry, and this in a state that had not yet recovered from Hurricane Katrina.

While this catastrophe was playing out, two quieter events occurred in two separate parts of the world.

In upstate New York, local news carried a story about Berkshire Bird Paradise, a bird sanctuary run by Pete Dubacher. Here two permanently injured Bald Eagles, Victoria and Baldwin, were raising their newly hatched chicks. Their story was newsworthy not just because Pete's sanctuary is one of the few places where captive, injured eagles feel safe enough to lay eggs and raise young, but also because Victoria is a survivor of the Exxon Valdez oil spill. And Pete Dubacher had a lot to say about how oil spills impact birds, how important it is for humans to care for the wildlife that end up as our collateral damage.

However, the news didn't cover one aspect of the story: Pete had been ordered by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to destroy Victoria's eggs. As required, he'd reported Victoria's two eggs to that office in March. He has about a dozen eagles, both golden and bald, and they've raised chicks before so he knows the routine. Then, in April, a few weeks before the BP oil spill, he received a letter from Fish and Wildlife demanding that he addle—i.e., destroy—Victoria's eggs, or his licenses would be at risk.

For a while he was afraid. First, it was way too late to destroy the eggs, since they'd already hatched, and second, he just couldn't

bring himself to do it, not after a lifetime of keeping birds alive. But soon his fear turned into anger. For thirty-five years he'd invested his life in caring for birds of all kinds, a vocation he was called to by his innate kindness.

He started this work when he was in the army, serving in Panama during the Vietnam War era. While there he saw wild birds for sale in the city markets. He felt sorry for the birds, and for the people who earned a meager living by selling them. In true Pete Dubacher style, his solution was to buy the birds and set them free. When he came home, his compassion for birds continued and he started Berkshire Bird Paradise.

This calling certainly wasn't ever going to make him rich. He hadn't had a vacation in more than fifteen years, and his work was truly 24/7. But it was and is his passion, and many people have benefited from it. Thousands of schoolchildren learn about birds each year by visiting his facility. Kids in juvenile detention centers and youth-at-risk programs have their lives changed through the inspiration Pete and his work provide. He's released many eagle chicks into the wild and has saved countless birds of all kinds, giving them permanent haven whether or not they came with a donation attached.

Now a federal office was threatening him because he was successful at breeding the eagle, our national symbol of freedom and strength.

To my mind, his anger was an appropriate response. Fish and Wildlife should be sending him chocolate and flowers rather than scolding letters. And the reason they gave for the letter—that Bald Eagles aren't on the endangered list anymore—left me stammering for appropriate words.

But what bothered me most was the dehumanization the letter represented. I would guess the official who signed it knew nothing about Pete or the daily functioning of Berkshire Bird Paradise. They'd never met any of the children whose eyes grew wide with wonder when they see a mother eagle feeding her chick, children

who will go on to feel a more personal investment in caring for the land and its creatures because of this experience. They were just following the rules.

Fortunately, Peter Nye, of the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC), intervened. He'd worked with Pete for a long time, and had reason to know the value of the sanctuary. He told Fish and Wildlife that New York State did want the eagles. In fact, Nye ended up bringing another eagle chick to the sanctuary, one that had been thrown from its nest during a storm. That chick was raised with Victoria and Baldwin's two. All three were later banded and released. Pete gave a sigh of relief and went back to his work.

While this small drama was enacted in upstate New York, a different story was spinning itself in the arid, open land near Kabul, Afghanistan, about 6,700 miles away. There, a young man named Scott Hickman was involved with a most unusual bird venture.

A former Army Ranger, Scott had returned to Afghanistan to work when the crashing economy took his job away. In early April, when he was training a group of Afghan soldiers, an interpreter found him and told him an eagle had been shot in the wing at a nearby shooting range. Later, he would learn that an Afghan soldier who was supposed to be using blanks had gotten some live ammunition, took a shot at the bird, and hit it.

Scott, who had an inherent interest in wildlife, went with the interpreter to see the bird. As he walked from his base camp toward the open land of the firing range part of him hoped to find the eagle dead rather than suffering. In the middle of Afghanistan, with limited resources and his time taken up by his job, he didn't know how he could help an injured bird.

Instead what he saw was an eagle lying on the ground, his wing bloodied. He tried to fly away but couldn't get more than a few yards without collapsing again. Scott approached, and the eagle's raptor eyes stared at him.

Within that primal gaze Scott saw frustration, bewilderment, and terror. The bird knew something was wrong, but he couldn't figure out why he was stuck on the ground, frozen in pain. And as all creatures do instinctively, he felt death creeping closer.

Scott bent down to him, and his compassion for the suffering he saw overrode any consideration of convenience, any question of what was possible or not possible. He had to do something to help.

He went back to his vehicle and got a sweatshirt, took it to the bird and wrapped him in it to keep him still, and brought him to help.

April 2010 was a busy month for both intelligent compassion and short-sighted greed. In ways large and small, both played themselves out, offering examples of humans at their best and their worst.

The months ahead would continue to do the same.