



## PLAYING “CATCH & RELEASE”

Trapping the golden eagle is an involved process, the goal of which is to mark the birds for future study.

The Draper Museum’s project includes a “banding” component in which Preston catches eagles and marks them for future identification with a United States Geological Survey (USGS) aluminum band, engraved with a unique and traceable serial number on one leg. On the other leg is a colored and boldly-numbered metal band that can be read from a distance. The process is time consuming and has a fairly limited success rate.

Preston’s team uses several trapping methods, depending on the situation and time of year. One of the most often-used is a bownet, a trap with a circular spring-loaded net similar to a volleyball net, and a remote-control hinge. Preston and the crew usually leave the Historical Center for the nesting site by 4 a.m. to completely set the trap in place before dawn.

By the light of headlamps, the crew covers the net with grass to match the surrounding landscape, and then baits the trap—typical bait includes road killed rabbit. All of this must be within sight of the eagles’ nest, but far enough away to avoid suspicion. When an eagle flies in to retrieve the bait, it’s caught, secured to avoid any injury and minimize stress, weighed, measured, and the metal bands placed around its legs. After that, the eagle is released. The whole banding process takes about 15 – 20 minutes from catch to release.

After three years, Preston and his team feel that they have detected virtually all golden eagle nest areas in their study area, and the citizen-science Golden Eagle Posse is well trained and extremely helpful. Data collected thus far indicates a close relationship between eagle productivity and annual fluctuations of key prey species. The Draper is currently producing new nest area distribution maps showing annual nesting results, which will be integrated with all future reports and scientific publications. Preston adds, “The related public education programming has become very popular with local and even national audiences, and we anticipate expanding our audiences via our Web site and through K – 12 ecological science curricula.”

