

Relearning to Fly

Holding the magnificent animal in my arms, I could feel his power, his will to be free. As I released him, he paused for a moment—perhaps to say thanks. Then, with a whoosh, he took flight, his broad wings vaulting him up over the Tongass National Forest. ■ Just weeks ago, this adult male bald eagle couldn't fly. Charlemange, a name befitting such a majestic animal, had been injured by a fishhook stuck in one of his

wings. After his rescue, Charlemange flew on Alaska Airlines from Ketchikan to Sitka, where caregivers at a unique place called the Alaska Raptor Center removed the hook and nursed him back to health.

Then I enjoyed the incredible honor of releasing this eagle back into the wild, to be reunited with his mate. Without the work of the Alaska Raptor Center, it would have been a very different outcome for Charlemange and his possible offspring.

Perched on 17 acres of Alaska coastline bordering the largest national forest in the United States, the Alaska Raptor Center is dedicated to rehabilitating and researching birds of prey, and educating the public about them. What started as a backyard nursery for one injured eagle 20 years ago is now a state-of-the-art facility that cares for up to 200 animals a year. While the center's specialty is raptors—bald eagles, hawks, falcons, ospreys and owls—its doors are open to all birds of a feather, from the tiniest hummingbird to the largest trumpeter swan.

In addition to medical facilities, the Raptor Center includes a giant indoor aviary where birds can test their wings. Call it "feathered physical therapy." The

animals take baby steps as they regain their strength and maneuverability, flying from tree to tree, drinking at a stream and preening in an enclosed rain forest area.

Since its inception, the center has released hundreds of rehabilitated animals back to the wild,

including dozens of bald eagles. The center also houses permanent residents—birds whose injuries prevent them from living safely on their own. Volta, a bald eagle, is among the most famous, and he greets the 40,000 visitors who experience the Alaska Raptor Center each summer.

Volta was brought to Sitka in 1992 after suffering an electrical shock. Although his

injuries healed, he cannot fly. Instead, Volta has accrued several thousand frequent flier miles on Alaska Airlines as an ambassador for the center, teaching schoolchildren from Alaska to Florida about raptors, their habitats and our 49th state. I suspect these children's first interaction with a bald eagle is as jaw dropping as mine was.

As a nonprofit entity, the Alaska Raptor Center's work is wholly supported by visitors and a host of friends. Alaska Airlines is proud to be among them. We've flown hundreds of birds and raptors to Sitka. The



Bill Ayer
Chairman and CEO

tickets are one-way as the birds are more than happy to fly home on their own.

Helping injured animals spread their wings again is just one of the many ways Alaska Airlines gives back to the communities we serve. We also transport thousands of human patients and their families every year though our support of groups such as the Make-A-Wish Foundation, Shriners Hospitals for Children, Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center, Northwest Burn Foundation and Angel Flight West, among others. As a volunteer pilot for Angel Flight West, I've witnessed the impact these amazing organizations have on people's lives.

Like the Alaska Raptor Center, these organizations do great things—and the holiday season reminds us how grateful we are for their work. We're also grateful to you, our customers, who have so generously donated through our Charity Miles Program to give further wing to our efforts.

Like Charlamange, we, too, pause to give thanks ... for your support and for flying with us. ▲

Bill Ayer

Reach out to others through the Alaska Airlines Charity Miles Program, accessible online at alaskaair.com/mileageplan. To learn more about the Alaska Raptor Center, go to www.alaskaraptor.org.



Bill Ayer releasing Charlemange with Dr. Victoria Vosberg, the Alaska Raptor Center's veterinarian.