



Eagle Passage wins national exhibit award

Immersive bald eagle habitat at Northwest Trek Wildlife Park wins top honors in Association of Zoos & Aquariums' 2021 Exhibit Award.

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EATONVILLE, Wash.-- Eagle Passage isn't just a forever home for rescued, injured bald eagles, or an immersive experience that inspires visitors with a conservation success story. Now, the unique habitat at Northwest Trek Wildlife Park has also been nationally recognized with top honors in the 2021 Exhibit Award category from the Association of Zoos & Aquariums.

The award was presented online at the AZA Virtual Annual Conference on Wednesday Sept. 22.

"Receiving this award is a high honor for Northwest Trek," said Alan Varsik, director of Northwest Trek and Point Defiance Zoo & Aquarium. "Our visitors know how special Northwest Trek is, and it's wonderful to have national recognition of the work we do. Eagle Passage is the result of our staff's creativity and commitment to conservation, and the generous support of the Northwest Trek Foundation. This award recognizes that on a national level."

Eagle Passage opened to the public on August 3, 2019 as both a way to tell the bald eagle conservation story and as a home for rescued bald eagles injured in the wild. Enclosed with high airy netting, it utilizes many existing old-growth Douglas firs, with cables and mesh attached to the forest giants via a unique, bolt-free block-and-collar system that allows the trees free growth. A walkway through the center allows visitors to see majestic bald eagles close-up, while giving the birds – all of whom have some degree of long-term wing injury – a safe passage between habitat sections.

In addition, Northwest Trek operations staff created safe perches for the injured eagles using 100-year-old dead tree snags repurposed from where they had fallen in other areas of the park. Cheveyo, an eagle with a completely amputated wing, was given her own exclusive area with low perches and branches covered with anti-slip material to help her balance.

To complete the experience for visitors, interactive displays tell the timeline story of how this iconic American species was saved from extinction by community action, as well as giving children a chance to "measure their wings" against a life-size graphic and climb inside a life-size concrete "nest." Northwest native plantings, including 30-year-old sword ferns salvaged from construction sites, fill out both the habitat and the bigger ecological story.

"My goal was to make Eagle Passage look and feel like where you would find bald eagles in the wild – up at Mount Rainier or on the Olympic Peninsula," said wildlife park horticulturalist Jake Pool.

Eagle Passage cost a total of \$578,474, which was raised by the nonprofit Northwest Trek Foundation from community donations. Key donors are recognized with bronze “feathers” on a low outside wall which surrounds a majestic bronze eagle statue by local artist Ed Kroupa.

Native to North America and once plentiful across the United States, bald eagles were close to extinction in the Lower 48 states by the middle of the 20th century. The Endangered Species Act and other laws, such as a ban on the pesticide DDT, afforded them the ability to safely reproduce. The species is no longer endangered and is more than a national symbol; it is an example of how people working together can help protect wild animals and wild places.

“Eagle Passage was designed to tell the recovery story of the bald eagle, reinforce our vital conservation mission and, most importantly, offer a message of hope to our guests and community about what we can do if we all care together,” added Varsik. “This award recognizes Northwest Trek’s cultural relevance, as well as our commitment to animal welfare.”

The Eagle Passage habitat can be found in the main walking area of Northwest Trek, every day that the wildlife park is open. For more information, see nwtrek.org/eaglepassage.

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Northwest Trek, accredited by the Association of Zoos & Aquariums, is a 723-acre zoological park dedicated to conservation, education and recreation by displaying, interpreting and researching native Northwest wildlife and their natural habitats. The wildlife park is a facility of Metro Parks Tacoma and is located 35 miles southeast of Tacoma off State Highway 161.

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