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## **Bird flying south for winter ... on United**

By John Biemer, Tribune staff reporter

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In their annual migration south for the winter, most birds don't fly commercial.

But when a United Airlines flight leaves O'Hare International Airport on Monday morning for Florida, one lucky vulture that missed its chance to migrate will be on board a plane packed with snowbirds following the sun.

"He's going cargo," said wildlife specialist Sandy Woltman of the Willowbrook Wildlife Center. "Direct flight to Tampa."

The center, part of the DuPage County Forest Preserve District, will pick up the tab as part of a seasonal role in aiding birds left behind by the passing migration season.

The \$178 bill may seem extravagant for a common animal that feeds on roadkill. But the center budgets \$500 annually out of contributions to its foundation for relocating wild animals, often birds that miss out on the migration, such as a northbound snowy owl with a broken wing recently shuttled up to Minnesota.

"We've found that if we can find a reasonable airfare and fly them down, we'll do that," said curator Sandy Fejt.

The young vulture is generally healthy now but was found disoriented and weak last month in the parking lot of an Oak Brook medical office. In Florida, it will be transferred to a sanctuary where it will be released into a group of vultures there.

"I think he somehow, for some reason, got separated from the group and was just kind of hanging out, probably eating garbage," Woltman said.

It would have been costly--\$2.50 each for its daily rat--and unhealthy to keep it penned up over the winter at the Glen Ellyn facility, Woltman said. If it were released now, it might not make it through the winter because food sources are scarce, frozen or covered in snow.

"It's the best thing for the bird," she said. "It's not even a money issue. It's the best thing for the bird. Get him out of captivity, get him released."

The vulture is among an odd trio of birds left behind this winter that volunteers brought into the rehabilitation center, including a great blue heron and a scarlet tanager.

The injured heron--found by a Lisle trash bin--is hitching a ride to a wildlife rehabilitation facility in Downstate Collinsville this week as the center's former curator drives down to Texas for the holidays. The rangy wading bird will have a better chance to heal its fractured wing and broken feathers where its long legs are less likely to get frostbite.

A Glen Ellyn cat attacked the tanager in October as it made its way south in a migration that would typically take it all the way to South America. Rather than springing for the international flight, the center is boarding the since-healed little songbird with plans to release it next spring when other tanagers return.

"She's ready to go," Woltman said. "She just missed the boat."

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