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LIVING

Local eagle update II

(Second of two parts)

Found: one pair of bald eagles. Sure enough, Buckhorn Lake's resident pair of eagles, supposedly homeless since their Kawartha



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

Hideaway nest tree blew down in the summer of 2006, are not only alive and well but do indeed have a new nest.

Following last week's article outlining the mystery of what had become of the Buckhorn eagles, I received a phone call from Bill Sanders, a local artist and outdoorsman. He

explained to me that he had been keeping a close eye on these birds for several years. Late last June, while renting a cottage at Kawartha Hideaway, Sanders went out for a paddle one day and saw one of the eagles. By following the bird, he easily found the new nest. It is located on an island, only about a kilometre from the original nesting site.

The icing on the cake, however, is that the nest contained two eaglets. Sanders was able to observe the young several times over the course of the summer. He saw them for the last time in late August. He reports that the nest is situated in a particularly sturdy white pine with lots of nearby perching branches. This is good news, given the havoc wind storms have wreaked on eagle nests recently. There is also an abundance of food in the immediate area, especially yellow perch and rock bass.

Although a bald eagle's summer diet again consists mostly of fish, they will also take just about anything else they're able to get their talons into including ducks and muskrats. At the bottom of one nest in Pinery Provincial Park, the remains of both a musk turtle and a screech owl were found. How an eagle could ever catch a tiny screech owl is a mystery to me.

The Kawarthas' other pair of nesting bald eagles makes its home on Lake Katchewanooka. Susan Brook, a very meticulous and enthusiastic eagle-watcher, has been keeping tabs on this pair for about five years now. These birds, too, lost their original nest to the wind in 2006. She informs me, however, that, beginning late last winter, these tireless and persistent eagles went on to built a second nest just a stone's throw from the first. Once again, a white pine was selected. They then successfully raised two young. Sadly, a violent summer wind got the better of this nest, too, and the birds are once again without lodgings.

However, it appears this may not be the case for long. Only two weeks ago, Brook saw an eagle fly over carrying a large stick. It headed directly to the tree that housed last summer's nest and would seem to be in the process of rebuilding. An eagle — possibly the same bird — has also been spending a lot of time perched in a nearby pine. Brook is not yet certain, though, whether both the male and female are present.

According to Jody Allair, an eagle researcher with Bird Studies Canada, southern Ontario bald eagles tend to hang around the



Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

general vicinity of the nest year round. They really only take the fall "off," as they get back to nesting business as early as January. Whether this holds true for Peterborough area birds is a good question. Brook reports that in past years, the Katchewanooka eagles would often disappear for a while in the fall and then reappear in late December.

Allair says there are plans next summer to put a satellite transmitter on an eaglet from the Peterborough area, thereby allowing researchers to track its movements. You'll then be able to watch the eaglet's wanderings yourself by going to the Bird Studies Canada website at www.bsc-eoc.org/ and clicking on Destination Eagle and then on Eagle Tracker. You can also keep tabs on Phyllis and Spirit, the two eagles mentioned in last week's column. By the way, as of November 29th, Spirit was down in West Virginia!

The Buckhorn and Katchew-

anooka birds bring up interesting questions. Where did they originate from? Are they part of the Great Lakes eagle population or the northern Ontario/Quebec population? Where do their young go when they leave the nest? Are they at risk from contamination present in the food chain of the Great Lakes basin food chain in the same way that birds found further south seem to be?

Southern Ontario eagles — birds nesting on or close to the shores of the Great Lakes — actually appear to have shortened life spans compared to other eagle populations. A possible explanation is heavy metal poisoning. In the last few years, several bald eagles found dead in Ontario have had elevated levels of both mercury and lead in their bodies.

In addition to our small coterie of nesting eagles, a second eagle population can also be found in the Kawarthas, but only in winter. These are birds that usually arrive

in early December and then depart sometime in March. They are most often seen in the area north of Stony Lake, particularly around Petroglyph Provincial Park, Northey's Bay Road, and Jack Lake.

We can still only speculate on where these wintering bald eagles are coming from. The best guess right now is that the birds are migrating south from northeastern Ontario and northwestern Quebec in order to take advantage of the food resources available here in winter. Eagles are excellent hunters and, as long as there is open water, they are able to catch fish and ducks. However, being opportunistic, they will also take dead animals of all descriptions, including animals that become frozen in the ice. Eagles seem to be most numerous when there are still open patches of water.

Once everything has frozen over, their diet probably turns to mostly deer and carrion. Given the high

deer population in and around the Petroglyphs, there are often large numbers of deer that die in the winter. Some fall through the ice, are unable to pull themselves out, and end up frozen there. These provide an easily visible and accessible source of eagle food.

Jerry Ball, one of our most knowledgeable local birders, informs me that eagles are also attracted to the carcasses of skinned animals left behind by trappers. He regularly sees eagles on Sandy Lake Road, north of Havelock, that partake of this source of food. Eagles will also visit dump sites and used to be commonly seen at the dump at Haultain before the garbage was placed in containers.

Data on the number of eagles counted on the Petroglyph Christmas Bird Count over the past 20 years or so seem to indicate that eagle numbers fluctuate a great deal from one year to the next. There could be 10 birds one year and then only two or three the next. These numbers almost certainly correlate to food availability. In a low deer-mortality year, many of these overwintering eagles probably move on to other areas. An increasing number of winter eagles is being found around Fenelon Falls, for example.

Allair wants to find the spot in the Petroglyphs where the eagles are spending the night. Three or four bald eagles will usually congregate in the same roosting tree at night. Exactly where this tree is located in the Petroglyphs-Stony Lake area remains to be determined.

If you should see a bald eagle, try to see if the bird is wearing a leg band. The band is quite visible as long as the bird is not hunkered down. Just the colour alone can tell biologists where the bird is from. For example, a black band on the left leg indicates a bird that was banded in a southern Ontario nest. It is already known that these eagles do travel through the Kawarthas, although they don't seem to actually hang around here for any length of time.

It's also quite possible that there are more than two pairs of eagles presently nesting in the Kawarthas. As already mentioned, a dead giveaway of nesting activity is an eagle carrying a stick. A pair of birds displaying courtship behaviour such as like locking talons in mid-air is also a sure indicator. Finally, any sighting of an adult eagle between April 1 and June 30 can often mean the bird has a nest.

If you have eagle sightings to report, Allair can be reached by e-mail at raptor@bsc-eoc.org or by telephone at 1-888-448-2473.

The comeback of the bald eagle, both locally and internationally, is a good news story that shows us how resilient the natural world can be when given half a chance. Unfortunately, it's also a story that is more the exception than the rule.

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