

November 30, 2004

The eagles has landed

Peterborough County has acquired a reputation since the mid-1980s as one of the better places in Ontario to see bald, and occasionally golden eagles in the late fall and winter. Most winters, at least ten birds are present in our area.

Eagles begin to arrive here in late November, presumably from nesting territories in northern Ontario. When northern lakes and rivers freeze, food becomes scarce and the birds are forced to winter elsewhere. Primarily scavengers, eagles are attracted to the Kawarthas in part because of the high deer population, especially in the Peterborough Crown Game Preserve north of Stoney Lake which is an important wintering area for deer. Deer fall prey each year to coyotes, road traffic, thin ice, disease and the adversity of winter. This, in turn, leads to a relative abundance of carcasses which attract not only eagles but large numbers of ravens.

Where there is open water, eagles will also feed on ducks, loons and fish. In late fall, ducks and loons often become frozen in the ice or find themselves trapped in a very small pocket of water. These birds are easy pickings for eagles. When scavenging is no longer profitable, eagles will also try their hand at catching live prey.

Bald eagles are extremely large birds with a wingspan of over six feet. Like many raptors, they spend a fair amount of time soaring. Their habit of soaring with wings held nearly flat is an important identification aid. Many of the bald eagles seen in the Kawarthas are dark-plumaged immature birds which lack the white head and tail of the adult. First-year eagles are especially dark and show white only on the underwing and tail. Bald eagles do not attain full adult plumage until four or five years of age. Care must be taken in the identification of these dark birds so as not to confuse them with ravens, turkey vultures (not here in the winter) and the much less common golden eagle.

In late fall and early winter, eagles can sometimes be seen sitting on the ice or in trees close to areas of open water. Lake Katchewanooka, upper Stoney Lake, Gannon's Narrows, Jack Lake and Buckhorn Lake are all good locations to look for early-winter eagles. Local birders often see them on Lake Katchewanooka from the bottom of Stenner Road, just north of Lakefield. The white pines on the small islands just west of the bridge in Young's Point are another occasional eagle perch. The birds turn up most years over the Otonabee River, too, and even at Little Lake.

Once the lakes have frozen over, eagles can often be found at local dumps such as those on Anstruther Lake Road, West Kosh Road near Nephton and in the village of Apsley. However, if you want to see the birds, you will need to arrive before human activity at the dump begins. This usually means getting there before 8:00 a.m. Later in the day, eagles will typically be seen soaring over areas such as Northey's Bay Road, especially in the vicinity of the Petroglyphs. Once again, identification will depend on taking a close look at all soaring birds in order to avoid confusion with the similar-shaped, but much smaller, common raven. Ravens have a long, wedge-shaped tail which is quite different from the eagle's.

Until fairly recently, bald eagles were in danger of disappearing completely from southern Ontario. In the early 1900s, an estimated 200 pairs nested in southern Ontario, from the Ottawa River to the Great Lakes. However, by the late 1970s, only a handful of pairs remained and they were producing no young. It was discovered that the birds were suffering from exposure to

pesticides, especially DDT. This infamous poison was sprayed regularly along wetlands, shorelines and in agricultural areas from the late 1940s to the 1970s. DDT interfered with eagles' ability to reproduce by causing eggshells to become so thin that they were crushed in the nest. The consequences were devastating.

How do levels of pesticides and other contaminants become so high in eagles? When chemical pollutants and pesticides are released, many will eventually disperse into the water and sediment of lakes. Microscopic plants and animals, called zooplankton, inadvertently draw up the chemicals as they feed. Many of these chemicals do not break down, so the organisms carry them as long as they live. As larger animals eat the zooplankton, the accumulated chemicals move into the larger organism's body. Eventually, the chemicals move up the food chain into the bodies of fish and fish-eating aquatic birds such as ducks. When eagles eat the fish or ducks, they consume the accumulated burden of the chemical. The chemical load continues to build up throughout the eagles' lives.

Laws were passed in Canada and the United States banning DDT and preventing the unrestricted use of other pesticides. Cooperation between landowners and conservationists has also led to the protection of eagle nesting habitat in some key areas. Although bald eagles are still ranked as a species at risk, their populations are expanding slowly on and around the Great Lakes. In 2003 volunteers found 28 active nests from Windsor to Ottawa with 44 young produced.

However, despite these successes, biologists are finding that adult birds in the Great Lakes region live only eight to 11 years, instead of the usual 30. Analysis of bald eagles found dead is now showing elevated levels of mercury and lead in their tissues. There is also concern that eagles may be eating waterbirds that have died from avian botulism and possibly putting themselves at risk.

Locally, a pair of eagles has nested in recent years on the Trent River near Healy Falls. In 2002, another pair established a breeding territory on an undisclosed lake in Peterborough County, adding nesting material to a pre-existing osprey nest. However, no eggs were laid. A year later, it appeared that a pair was preparing to nest on Lake Katchewanooka, but they, too, abandoned their plans. Young, inexperienced eagles may "practice" for several years before actually nesting. The new Ontario Breeding Bird Atlas, which is a volunteer-based 5-year project to gather data on the breeding distribution of all the bird species that breed in Ontario, reports eagles nesting in the Rideau Lakes north of Kingston and possibly nesting in Haliburton. It would therefore seem like only a matter of time until an active nest is discovered on the Kawartha Lakes.

What to watch for this week

Great gray owls have been reported in recent weeks in Algonquin Park and in the North Bay area. This may indicate a significant southward movement this winter. The last great gray "invasion" was in 1995-96 when over 300 of these magnificent owls of the boreal forest were observed in central Ontario. Keep your eyes open.

Drew Monkman is a local naturalist, teacher and author of *Nature's Year in the Kawarthas*.