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LIVING

They're back

The first eagle nestings in Peterborough County since the 1800s took place this summer

As many people have been predicting in recent years, the bald eagle has finally returned to Peterborough County as a breeding species. This past summer, two pairs of eagles nested here and successfully reared young. One nest was located on Lake

Katchewanooka and the other on Buckhorn. As far as we know, these are the first eagle nestings in the county since the 1800s and, obviously, cause for celebration.

According to Doug Sadler in Our Heritage of Birds, the bald eagle was a fairly common bird in the Kawarthas in early days.

Catherine Parr Trail wrote in 1836 that eagles "frequently flew over our clearing" at Lakefield. Charles Fothergill, who lived at the mouth of the Otonabee River near Hiawatha from 1816 to 1840, reported bald eagles as "nesting in lofty pines" and shot one on June 10, 1820.

In more recent years, however, almost all local eagle sightings have been restricted to the winter months. Since the early 1980s, the birds have been regular visitors to the Kawarthas from December through March, albeit in small numbers. They are often seen in the area around Petroglyphs Provincial Park, where deer carcasses provide a major source of food, and on Lake Katchewanooka.

Until fairly recently, however, bald eagles were in danger of disappearing completely from southern Ontario. The number of nesting pairs declined from at least 200 in the early 1900s to only a handful in the late 1970s — and these birds were not producing any young. It was discovered that the birds were suffering from exposure to pesticides, especially DDT. DDT interfered with the eagles' ability to reproduce by causing eggshells to become so thin that they were crushed in the nest. The consequences were devastating.

Since laws were passed banning DDT and preventing the unrestricted use of other pesticides, eagle populations are once again expanding on and around the Great Lakes. In 2003, volunteers found 28 active nests from Windsor to Ottawa with 44 young produced. Locally, a pair of eagles has nested in recent years on the Trent River near Healy Falls in Northumberland County. With all of this renewed eagle activity, it was obviously just a matter of time until a pair nested in Peterborough County.

It came as little surprise that Katchewanooka and Buckhorn would be the first lakes to host nesting eagles. On both lakes, a pair of eagles had stayed quite late into the spring these past three



Terry Carpenter, special to The Examiner

years and had even been seen carrying nesting material. As is often the case, they had chosen osprey nests to use as their own. However, they did not stay past April. When the ospreys returned from their wintering grounds, the eagles departed. It is well-known that young, inexperienced eagles will "practise" nesting for several years before actually laying eggs.

Well, in 2005, the practising was over. We can be very thankful that a keen observer living on Lake Katchewanooka has chronicled the entire event. She writes that the "parents to be" arrived back, presumably from northeastern Ontario, in December of 2004. By February, they were seen every day, on or around the same osprey nest as in the previous two years. The nest is located in the top of a dead white pine on a small, uninhabited island. However, even more exciting news came in mid-March when one of the birds began sitting continually on the nest. Moreover, when the ospreys returned in April to once again set up house, the eagles held their ground instead of beating a hasty retreat.

On April 28, the news that so many had been hoping for finally came. A careful examination of the nest through a spotting scope confirmed the presence of a baby

eagle. Assuming that the baby may have been there for up to a week before it was large and active enough to see, this would mean the egg had been laid on approximately March 15. Bald eagles have a 36 day incubation period. As with ospreys, first year nesters often lay only one egg. When there is sufficient food in the area, older nesting pairs may lay up to three eggs.

Watching the parents was quite a treat. They would sometimes hunt in the vicinity of the nest, scooping fish out of the water with their talons. At other times, they would fly down to the Lakefield Marsh, sometimes returning to the nest with a muskrat. There was also a lot of high-pitched calling, especially when ospreys came near the nest. The eagle's call is similar to that of a gull but faster and more emphatic. Because of the size difference between the two adults, the female being the larger bird, it was often possible to know which bird was doing what. Both male and female eagles take turns sitting on the nest and feeding the young.

Now almost entirely brown, the eaglet was seen flapping its wings on May 9 and, by month's end, was perching on the side of the nest. Over the next week, the amount of wing flapping continued until by

late June 22, it started flying up vertically and coming straight back down onto the nest. One day, while doing these practice manoeuvres, the wind blew it to the side and it ended up landing on a branch. It took two days before the eaglet figured out, that by flapping and jumping in a step-stone fashion, it could return to the nest. The parents did not feed the baby the entire time it was out on the branch.

Over the following days, the young bird became progressively braver, venturing out onto nearby branches. On July 8, it made its first solo flight to a neighbouring tree. By July 18, it was flying like an adult. The juvenile bird remained in the vicinity of the nest until Sept. 1, when it was last seen. Juveniles are not good hunters and often remain dependent on the parents for many weeks. They will often scavenge for dead prey, too.

Our lakeside observer sporadically saw the adult eagles during most of October, but she believes they may now have left. They should, however, return for the winter and then nest again in the same location. The eagles on Buckhorn Lake also nested successfully, as the juvenile bird was seen flying on many occasions.

At a time when so many bird

species are in serious decline, it's heartening to know that a bird as majestic as the bald eagle is making a successful comeback and is once again nesting in Peterborough County.

What to watch for this week

A number of northern bird species should be arriving in central Ontario any time now. At backyard feeders, watch for American tree sparrows. In old fields with small trees, keep an eye open for the northern shrike. Indications are that this should also be a good year for both pine grosbeaks and bohemian waxwings. Grosbeaks are attracted to European mountain-ash and ornamental crabapples but will occasionally come to feeders with sunflower seeds.

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