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LIVING

Bald-eagle update

Missing: one pair of bald eagles.
Likely whereabouts: Buckhorn Lake.

Somewhere out there is a missing pair of adult bald eagles. After having nested successfully for two successive years near Kawartha Hideaway on Buckhorn Lake, the birds' nest blew down in the summer of 2006. For most of the time since then, they have been missing in action. However, a pair of eagles seen this fall on Upper Buckhorn may well have been the missing birds. And, according to eagle expert Jody



OUR CHANGING SEASONS
Drew Monkman

Allair, there is a strong likelihood that the dispossessed tenants now have another nest. The question is where?

Allair is the project biologist and outreach co-ordinator for Bird Studies Canada (BSC), an organization devoted to the conservation of wild birds and their habitats. He spoke recently to the Peterborough Field Naturalists and provided an update on the bald eagle situation in southern Ontario. He also explained the current situation with bald eagles in the Kawarthas. For the most part, the news is good. However, a few menacing clouds remain on the horizon.

Originally from Peterborough, Allair saw his first bald eagle near Petroglyph Provincial Park when he was 12 years old. He has never gotten over it. Eagles — and birds in general, for that matter — have become his passion. Now, with his position at BSC, Allair is in a position to take a leadership role in eagle research and to help assure that the population prospers.

With a two-metre wing span and a flat-winged style of flight, the bald eagle is a formidable bird. Allair compares it to a flying two-by-four. The eagle's eyes are almost as big as a human's which is incredible when you consider a bald eagle only weighs about 10 pounds. It is actually able to see a fish in the water from two kilometres away. Also, because of the pronounced brow ridge, eagles have a stern, powerful appearance that is unique in the bird world. The ridge is very practical, however, because it acts almost like a visor and helps shade the eyes from sunlight as the eagle soars over water looking for food.

A bald eagle's nest is almost as amazing as the bird itself. It is usually located in a tall tree adjacent to water, usually affording a commanding view of the surrounding countryside. Since eagles add branches to their nest every year, the structure can eventually become as big as a Volkswagen Beetle and weigh several tons. If the tree is less than sturdy, the weight of the nest often becomes a liability in wind storms and both nest and tree can come crashing to the ground.

Bald eagle numbers have fluctuated dramatically since the 1800s. Factors such as European settlement, habitat loss, hunting, and chemical contaminants have had a huge impact on eagle numbers throughout North America. The

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Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

bald eagle was listed as an endangered species in the U.S. and Ontario in 1973. However, in this same decade, both countries severely restricted DDT use and tightened regulations for disposing of industrial chemicals. Since then, the bald eagle has come back from near-extinction in many regions.

In fact, bald eagle populations in U.S. states such as New York, Ohio, and Michigan are going through the roof. In some places in Ohio, they are increasing exponentially. So, it's not surprising that just this past summer, the U.S. government removed the bald eagle from the endangered species list.

In Canada as a whole, the bald eagle is doing well. Although it is not considered at risk on a national level, there are still concerns about the long-term viability of the southern Ontario population. According to Allair, we are not seeing the frenetic population growth in Ontario that is occurring in much of the eastern U.S. In fact, the southern Ontario population is the last remaining endangered bald eagle

population in North America. This obviously leads to the question of what is happening with the Great Lakes bald eagle population.

In 1980 — a mere 27 years ago — no bald eagles successfully nested in southern Ontario.

Since then, however, the eagles have recovered from near extirpation to establish a small but slowly increasing population. In 2006, there were 34 known active nests. However, the southern Ontario bald eagle is still listed by the province as endangered.

Currently, nearly two-thirds of the bald eagle nests in southern Ontario are located along the north shore of Lake Erie. Eagles have not yet returned to the north shore of Lake Ontario, probably because of a lack of suitable habitat away from human development.

In an ongoing effort to better understand what is happening with the southern Ontario eagle population, eagle nests are now closely monitored. The Southern Ontario Bald Eagle Monitoring Project, initiated in 1983, is a co-

operative venture of BSC and other government bodies, along with landowners and volunteer nest monitors. Every year, nest monitors collect valuable data on bald eagle nesting activity which allows biologists to monitor the health of the population. To date there are approximately 200 volunteer nest monitors, including three locally.

As long as the nest is accessible, a biologist will climb the tree, lower one of the eaglets to the ground in a bag, and weigh, measure, and band it with coloured leg bands. Blood and feather samples are also taken in order to track levels of contaminants and heavy metals. Data collected from these field studies have shown that since the mid-1990s, contaminants have declined dramatically. Coincident with this decline, the number of active nests has increased.

Four summers ago, bald eagle monitoring went one step further. As Allair explained, it wasn't known where the young bald eagles from southern Ontario nests went

after leaving home. Surprisingly, none has ever come back to breed in southern Ontario. Therefore, in 2004, BSC began a satellite monitoring program called Destination Eagle.

Eaglets are set up with a solar-powered satellite transmitter. The apparatus is attached to the bird's back — almost like a backpack — so its wanderings can be followed. The hope is that a monitored bird will eventually come back to breed in southern Ontario. The transmitter only weighs about 33 grams and is therefore of no consequence to a 10-pound bird. The operation of putting on a transmitter doesn't bother the eaglet, either, or even the parent birds for that matter. In fact, the parents will often leave the nest area for a couple of hours, let the biologists do their thing, and then return with food for the babies as if nothing has happened.

Allair related the fascinating stories of Phyllis and Spirit, two eaglets from a nest near Kingston that were harnessed with transmitters in 2006. As soon as she was able to fly, Phyllis immediately left the nest, almost as if saying "It's been nice, but I'm out of here." Believe it or not, she headed straight up to James Bay! This is a very significant finding because in many eagle populations the young hang around with the parents for a long time after leaving the nest. Not the southern Ontario birds, obviously. Phyllis actually stayed around James Bay until freeze up in late November, when the ducks and geese left. She was simply following her food source as she should.

Spirit, on the other hand, said "It's been cool, but I'm going to Virginia." Sure enough, the bird headed in the exact opposite direction of her sibling! Together, the two eaglets flew over almost half of North America. Then, around New Year's, both birds spent several days together back at the nest. This fall, Phyllis has been up in Labrador, while Spirit is spending her time on the southern shore of Lake Ontario.

The Destination Eagle program has shown that southern Ontario eagle movements are unpredictable, siblings disperse independently of one another, but that most of the birds actually do remain around the Great Lakes Basin. In addition, many of the places where these young birds are spending their time are so-called contamination "hot-spots" like southwestern Lake Erie. This may help to explain why Great Lake birds have a shorter lifespan than the population in general. Finally, this research indicates that high mortality rates of young birds is occurring. However, this is to be expected, since a 50-per-cent mortality rate in eagles is the norm. Next week, I will focus once again on the bald eagles of the Kawarthas.

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