



Webcam shots show eagles incubating eggs, then feeding their young — three nestlings, then only two. (Photos from

## High nest, low blows rivet Web audience Unvarnished `Eaglecam' chronicles passions aloft

By Jenna Russell, Globe Staff | June 8, 2006

In a nation obsessed with "The Sopranos," it's hard to imagine how a single camera trained on a birds' nest in Maine could become a hit show on the Internet.

Then again, when the birds are baby bald eagles fighting for survival -- even pecking their siblings to death to fatten their own food supply -- perhaps the popularity of the "Bald Eaglecam" isn't surprising.

Perched high in a massive white pine near the ocean in Maine's Hancock County, the "Eaglecam" nest was chosen for stardom by state wildlife biologists, who placed a surveillance camera in a nearby tree in January. Their goal was to capture the lives of the resident couple through breeding season, and beam their story live to a worldwide audience.

But the biologists never predicted the sharp dramatic turn the tale would take, as thousands of viewers watched live on their computers.

The eagle eggs were laid in March and hatched in mid-April. Three fuzzy eaglets emerged. On a blog where biologists explain the eagles' behavior and viewers post comments and observations, eagle-watchers from as far away as Texas, Ireland, Africa, and Pittsburgh heaped praise on the mother eagle as it selflessly shielded its offspring through weeks of drenching downpours.

But viewers saw more than noble instincts.

By late April, at feeding times, when the father eagle swooped in with snacks of sea birds, fish,

and crabs, the smallest eaglet was pushed to the back by its siblings and left unfed. Then something even more disturbing happened: The largest eaglet attacked its smallest sibling, and within a few days, apparently pecked it to death.

“I hope that I’m wrong about what I saw,” wrote one dumbfounded witness on the blog.

Wildlife biologists confirmed the siblicide on the blog and described it as a natural occurrence. “What you are observing on the Web camera is unedited, unsanitized, real-time nature -- survival of the fittest,” Mark McCollough of the US Fish and Wildlife Service wrote to the dismayed audience.

Ugly as it was, the killing did nothing to quell the obsession with the eaglets, whose every move continues to fuel online chatter.

“I’ll never get any work done! I can’t pull myself away from this fantastic show!” Celeste from Alabama said in a recent posting.

Some of the most thrilling moments are ahead, the biologists said. This summer, the eaglets should begin testing their wings, playing trampoline in the nest and strutting on high branches before attempting their first flights, a leap that can end in triumph or disaster, said wildlife biologist Charlie Todd of the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

The Biodiversity Research Institute in Gorham, Maine, hosts the “Eaglecam” and a live “Looncam” on its website, [briloon.org](http://briloon.org), where traffic has jumped from about 200 visits a day to about 27,000. The small, nonprofit group has asked for donations to offset the \$2,000 monthly cost of the webcast.

Scientists attribute some of the interest to recent news about bald eagles: Earlier this year, the US Fish and Wildlife Service announced plans to remove the bird from the federal list of endangered species.

In Maine, where breeding bald eagle pairs had dwindled to fewer than two dozen by the 1960s, four decades of protection have restored the population to almost 400 pairs, Todd said.

This spring in Vermont, a successful breeding pair produced the first bald eagle offspring in that state in 60 years.

Another webcast, at [www.nu.com/eagles](http://www.nu.com/eagles), a project of Northeast Utilities and the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, is trained on a nest in Massachusetts. According to the Massachusetts Audubon Society, there were 18 pairs of bald eagles in the state in 2004.

If the bald eagle loses its protected status, it will be up to regular citizens to ensure its survival, said Wing Goodale, a research biologist with the Gorham institute. He hopes the “Eaglecam” will foster a bond between man and bird.

“I hope that by seeing their trials and tribulations, people will understand the struggle they go through, and feel personally connected,” he said.

The plan appears to be working.

“This is better than the Montel Williams show . . . or TV for that matter,” wrote another “Eaglecam” viewer named Dave. “I never thought bird watching could be so fascinating.” ■

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