

New mysteries, wonders of our national symbol

By Derrick Z. Jackson
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AS OTHER researchers banded two bald eagle chicks lowered from a nest along the Androscoggin River, Chris Martin, senior biologist for New Hampshire Audubon, and Ken Munney, a contaminants biologist for the US Fish and Wildlife Service, discussed the white sucker fish that came down the tree with the chick.

"How much did you take for the sample?" Martin asked Munney.

"One side," Munney said. "A one-sided filet."

"Ummm," Martin said. "White sucker filet."

"You ever had any?" Munney asked.

"Once, that was enough. Too mealy," Martin said, gritting his teeth in a distasteful pose.

"Ever try it smoked?" Munney asked.

"Maybe smoked would be better. Ahhh. White sucker. The new white meat."

As they talked, an adult eagle swooped over the canopy with a fish, but refused to land because Chris DeSorbo from the BioDiversity Research Institute in Gorham, Maine, was still up at the nest, waiting to return the chicks and the sucker.

On this day in early June, these researchers banded chicks upstream and downstream from a defunct pulp mill in Berlin, and took blood samples to detect any differences in toxin levels.

"We're always learning new things and new mysteries," DeSorbo said. New Hampshire last year recorded a record 15 territorial pairs. "We test shed feathers we find on the ground. You could have adults 15 to 20 years old that might be successfully raising chicks when they are young but might be building up poisons that stop them from breeding at some point."

At this first site, the two chicks were also analyzed by Chris Persico and Rick Gray of the BioDiversity Research Institute. They were joined by two volunteer birders and retirees who watched the nest for weeks, Ray and Hildy Danforth. Ray, 63, was a local pulp mill environmental director. At the second site, off the Route 16 section of the Androscoggin between Milan and Errol, the researchers boated out to a bog, then waded in ankle-soaking water the length of a football field to an island.

There, Gray climbed up to shuttle down three chicks, one still very small and almost all gray down, one medium, and one well darkened with oncoming dark brown feathers.

Triple eagle nests are always exciting evidence of a healthy environment for the eagles, with abundant food to feed the chicks. Just as exciting, Martin used his spotting scope to ascertain that the adult eagles were banded in New York and Massachusetts. It was fresh evidence that if you give eagles a chance, they will fan out to reproduce hundreds of miles away from their birthplace.

DeSorbo said that some eagles also have a great fidelity to where they were hatched. "We had one eagle we banded at Canada Falls way up [in the North Woods] in Maine that was hit by a car in Pennsylvania or New Jersey," DeSorbo said. "We had a couple eagles fitted with satellite transmitters and one of the chicks [from the Rangeley Lakes area] eventually went over to New York, got blown by a big storm down to Virginia and West Virginia and then made it back" to the Rangeley region.

Then there is the unsightly side that reminds researchers that, precisely because of their ability to soar over great stretches, just providing a safe island for a nest is not enough to protect the bird that has recovered from endangered status.

"When we go up in the nest, we find all kinds of trash they end up snatching along with food," DeSorbo said. "We've seen Styrofoam cups, plastic trash bags, fish hooks, a whole box worth of sinkers [likely containing lead], monofilament, and even pink panties. One time, we saw an eagle chick with Fruit of the Loom underwear wrapped around its talons. It was still alive because it was being fed by the adults.

"But if we had not climbed the nest to band it, the first time it would have tried to fly, it wouldn't have made it."

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