

2007 An Up and Down Year for Eagles at Shiawassee Refuge

January 15, 2008

Shiawassee National Wildlife Refuge provides important habitat for bald and golden eagles. The state-listed endangered bald eagle nests at the refuge, but the greatest numbers occur during winter and migration. Golden eagles are rare but regular at Shiawassee Refuge, with one or two found almost annually from late autumn to early spring. Many positive and negative events occurred for eagles at the refuge in 2007.



*Joe and Barb Rogers of the Wildlife Recovery Association with a wounded refuge bald eagle.
Jonathan Priday/USFWS; January 2007*

The year started with a sour note when a refuge hunter found a sick immature bald eagle in January. With the help of a local wildlife rehabilitator and a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Special Agent this bird was captured. However, it died shortly thereafter. Analysis by the Service's National Fish and Wildlife Forensics Laboratory determined that the eagle died from lead poisoning after ingesting a lead fragment.

In January and February refuge staff monitored the activity of a pair of bald eagles at a nest near Spaulding Drain. This nest was built the previous year and it appeared promising that the pair would stay to nest. However, refuge staff observed an airboat lingering near the shoreline nest during this period when breeding eagles are especially sensitive to disturbance. Unfortunately, these eagles abandoned the site.



A pair of the refuge's nesting bald eagles. Kim Le Blanc; May 2006

Still more disappointing news came in April. A refuge visitor reported “a large bird” flopping around near Ferguson Bayou Trail. Refuge staff found and captured a golden eagle with a serious wing injury and took it to rehabilitators at the Howell Conference and Nature Center. Unfortunately, the wing was too damaged to be repaired. Further, the injury was above the bird’s “wrist.” Thus, the wing could not be amputated because this would yield a severe loss of balance for the bird. It is Service policy to euthanize birds in this condition.

Good news came in April when a refuge neighbor reported that he could see a pair of bald eagles on a nest through his back window. Refuge staff verified this new nest, bringing the refuge total to four, which was a new high. However, May

brought bad news when the neighbor called during a windstorm to report that the nest blew down. An immediate search by refuge staff turned up no eaglets for potential rescue. However, these birds continued to be seen in the immediate area through the rest of the year and it appears promising that they will attempt to nest again in 2008.



*The refuge provides important habitat in summer for eagles that have not reached breeding age.
Kim Le Blanc; August 1006*

Mixed results came in July when the refuge could officially determine the success of its bald eagle nesting pairs. The East Lansing Ecological Services Field Office conducts long term monitoring of environmental contaminants in breeding eagles by collecting blood and feather samples from eaglets as well as prey remains and unhatched eggs. Unfortunately, after a long climb up the nest tree, the refuge's Birch Run Drain nest contained no eggs or young. However, the Eagle Marsh nest contained two healthy eaglets. This was especially good news, since this nest produced no young the previous year after being productive for approximately the previous 15.

The year ended with a positive note in December when refuge staff documented a new daily high count of 91 bald eagles. Isolated stretches of refuge rivers remained open through most of the month while most area waters were frozen. This yielded access to an abundance of fish and concentrated waterfowl in areas removed from human disturbance. Further, these rivers experienced an especially large run of gizzard shad this year, providing more food than usual. The previous high count was 68 recorded in 2004.