

A HISTORY OF BALD EAGLES ON IROQUOIS NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

Below is a brief synopsis of the nesting history of bald eagles on the refuge. Bald eagles came to the refuge as a result of the cooperative efforts of state and federal wildlife personnel.

Before the 1950's, New York State had over 70 bald eagle nesting sites. Most were located in northern and western New York. A decade later, that number plummeted to ONE known active nest. Why? Habitat destruction, including development and the use of DDT were the primary causes. The remaining pair of eagles were not able to produce their own young because of the accumulation of DDT in their bodies.

In 1976, New York State led the way for the bald eagles' return when it launched a program using a falconry technique called HACKING.

In hacking, birds, taken from wild nests at 7-8 weeks of age, are transported to a release site where they are raised in artificial nests. The nests were within cages atop 35 foot towers to simulate being in a tree. At this age, eagles can feed themselves if food is provided, but cannot yet fly. At about 12 weeks of age, the birds are allowed to leave the nest on their own. For another month, human caretakers continue to leave fish and other food items at the hack tower for the eaglets to feed on until they learn how to hunt on their own.

Before their release, each eaglet received a colored wing marker and leg bands linking them to their hack site for future identification.

Phase I

The main goal of this experimental phase was to learn if eagles would orient to a new location and establish a nest site there.

Between 1976 - 1980, 23 young eagles were hacked at Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge in Seneca Falls, New York. The birds came from wild nests in Michigan, Minnesota and Wisconsin as well as from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Research Center in Laurel, Maryland

In 1980 the two eagles released in 1976 built a nest 84 miles north of the release site and hatched the first clutch of "New Yorkers" in nearly 20 years. Other successes followed. Enough to encourage biologist to move onto the next phase.

Phase II

The hacking program expanded to three more sites. This time birds came from Alaska where bald eagles are more abundant. This ambitious project was a cooperative effort between the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the Alaska Fish and Game Department and the U. S. Forest Service.

Over two years (1981 - 1982) a total of 42 eaglets were hacked on Oak Orchard State Wildlife Management Area, east of Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge. The next year, the release site was moved to the Adirondacks where 54 more eagles were released. The final hacking site was located near Albany where 32 eagles were hacked between 1984 - 1985.

Conclusion - A second chance

Although the hacking program ended in 1985, eagle numbers have continued to increase. The original goal was to have at least 10 productive pairs of bald eagles in New York. Today there are at least five times that number. One of these success stories is going on at Iroquois National Wildlife Refuge where there has been an active eagle's nest since 1986.

Other states that adopted the hacking program have experienced equal success. So much so that in 1998 our national symbol was taken off the Endangered Species list and is considered RECOVERED. The bald eagle is still protected under other federal and state laws. Now we must learn from our mistakes so that this near tragedy does not happen to them or any other species again

1981-82

Forty-two eagles from Alaska were HACKED (released) on Oak Orchard State Wildlife Management Area, east of the refuge.

1986

Two of the hacked birds (identified by wing tags) built a nest on Iroquois NWR. (NEST #1). Two eaglets hatched.

1987

The male returns with an immature female (identified by a wing tag as a bird hacked near Albany) and built a second nest 1/4 mile away from Nest #1. No eggs, no eaglets.

1988

The pair of eagles return and use Nest #1. Two eaglets hatched and fledged.

1989

Eagles use Nest #1. Two eaglets hatched and fledged.

1990

Eagles use Nest #1. Two eaglets hatched and fledged.

1991

Eagles use Nest #1. One eaglet hatched and fledged.

1992

Eagles use Nest #1. One eaglet hatched and fledged.

1993

Eagles use Nest #1. One egg laid but did not hatch.

1994

"Eagle Cam" installed in Nest # 1. Eagles construct and use Nest #2. Male returns with a new female (identified by muddy brown head instead of fully white). Three eagles hatched and fledged.

1995

"Eagle Cams" installed in both nests. Eagles use Nest #2. Two eaglets hatched and fledged.

1996

Eagles use Nest #1. Two eaglets hatched and fledged.

1997

Eagles use Nest #2. Two eaglets hatched. One is accidentally killed by one of the adults at two days old. Two foster chicks hatched at the Salisbury Zoo in MD were added to the nest and adopted by the parents. All three eaglets fledged.

1998

Eagles use Nest #2. Two eaglets hatched. On May 31, the nest tree blew down in a storm killing the 6-week-old birds. Both parents survived.

1999

Eagles use Nest #1. Two eaglets hatched and fledged.

2000

Eagles use Nest #1. The pair is an adult male and immature female, approximately 3 years old. No eggs laid.

2001

Female eagle from 2000 returned with a new male (with leg bands). Laid two eggs March 1 & 4. Both eggs failed.

A **new nest** was discovered on Cayuga Pool, built by a different pair. One eaglet hatched in early May (?) One eaglet was banded by state biologist on May 17, 2001.



Photo by Mike Allen, NYS DEC

2002

Eagles stayed in the area most of the winter.

Nest #1 (Mohawk Nest) eagles started incubating in late Feb. or early March. Nest and at least one egg lost in wind storms of March 10. Nest was rebuilt but, in a different tree which is not visible from headquarters or any other public viewing area. Eagles did not lay any more eggs. During the winter, the remains of the old nest tree came down.

Cayuga Nest - birds worked on and around the nest in March. Nest was lost in a wind storm of March 10. Nest was rebuilt in the same tree, but the birds did not lay eggs.

Oak Orchard Nest (on state land) - birds seen in the area. Nest survived the wind storm and birds successfully hatched two young.

2003

Mohawk Nest - Mohawk pair hatched 1 eaglet in early April.



Photo by Peter Nye, DEC

One eaglet banded in the nest on May 20, 2003.

Cayuga Nest - Birds laid and hatched three eggs. Eggs hatched on April 28, April 30 and May 3. There has not been a hatching of three eggs in one nest since 1994.

Oak Orchard Nest - Birds appear to be feeding young. Two chicks in the nest.

2004

Mohawk Nest - A pair was seen at the Mohawk Pool nest in mid-February. Eagles began incubating in mid-March. Two eaglets fledged.

Cayuga Nest - A pair of bald eagles were first seen on the nest in Cayuga Pool on 02/17/04. A sub adult (between 2-4 years old) was also seen looking over the nest on 02/20/04. The bird had leg bands and may have been one of the offspring from a previous year. On February 27, a Great Horned Owl moved into the Cayuga Nest. The eagles have been seen working on new nest in a tree within the marsh. Unfortunately, it will not be on camera. The owl hatched and fledged one owlet and the eagles hatched and fledged one eaglet.

Oak Orchard Nest - Eagles began incubating in mid-March. Two eaglets fledged.

2005

Mohawk Nest - Eagles began incubating in early March. Two eaglets were banded on May 12.

Cayuga Nest - Eagles used nest #2. Began incubating in mid-March. Two eaglets were banded on May 12.

Oak Orchard Nest - Eagles began incubating in early to mid-March. **Three** eaglets were banded on May 12.



Photo by Peter Nye, DEC

2006

Due to the mild weather, the eagles seemed to stay around the refuge most of the winter and began working on the nests in early February.

Mohawk Nest - Eagles began incubating in early March and hatched in mid-April. Three eaglets banded in May.

Cayuga Nest - Eagles began incubating around the second week in March and hatched in mid-April. One eaglet banded in May.

Oak Orchard Nest - Three eaglets banded in May.

2007

Mohawk Nest – Eagles began incubating in late February. One eaglet fledged.

Cayuga Nest – Eagles began incubating in early March. Two eaglets fledged.

Oak Orchard Nest – Three eaglets fledged.

2008

Mohawk Nest – Eagles began incubating in late February. One eaglet fledged.

Cayuga Nest – Eagles began incubating in late February. Two eaglets fledged.

Oak Orchard Nest – One egg laid, but did not hatch.