DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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EGG TRANSPLANTS HELPING BALD EAGLE POPULATION

Two recent events may signal new hope for Maine's bald eagles, which have been unable to produce young lately because pesticide residues have contaminated their eggs.

Last month, four eggs plucked from the nests of healthy bald eagles in Wisconsin were placed in active nests in Maine so nesting eagles can hatch them and raise the fledglings as their own. Last week, two of the Maine eggs that had been replaced by those from Wisconsin unexpectedly hatched in incubation at the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center where they had been taken for routine incubation and study. In the past, most eggs from Maine nests failed to hatch the embryos under patiently incubating parent birds.

Some scientists believe that the hatching of the eggs may be even more significant to the future of Maine's eagles than egg transplants. It may mean a decline in pesticide levels in the eagle population of Maine where the use of DDT has been banned since 1970. Eagles in the area where the eggs were taken had not produced young for over a decade. Fish and Wildlife Service researchers, however, point out that this instance must be taken as an indication only and cannot be considered as conclusive evidence that the Maine eagles are recovering. The hatching may also mean that egg survival is possible for pesticide-weakened eggs only under laboratory conditions.

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The newly hatched eaglets will be banded by Service biologists next month in the hope that their future movements and health can be monitored. Then they will then be returned to Maine and placed in foster nests. Road-killed deer and other animals with low pesticide levels will be deposited near the nests so that the parent birds and young can feed on "clean" food.

A trial transplant conducted last year in Maine with eggs from Minnesota resulted in the successful fledging of one young eagle and proved that this technique may eventually help salvage declining eagle populations.

The project began after research indicated high DDT and dieldrin residues were responsible for killing embryos and causing thinned eggshells. Some eggshells were so thin they broke during brooding.

The project has yielded a number of important discoveries for Fish and Wildlife Service researchers, including a practice that increases the production of eagle eggs. By removing eggs from nests early in incubation, the parents can be induced to lay a second clutch of eggs, usually within a month. This effectively doubles the normal season egg production.

Apparently, adult eagles seem to tolerate the biologists who scale 100-foot pine trees to remove or add eggs and fledglings to the nests. The parents keep a watchful vigil on the switching team, circling overhead and emitting a chattery, ringing sound. Switches usually take less than 30 minutes and the parents return to the nest as soon as the area is cleared. The foster parents appear convinced the birds are their own offspring and care for them with daily feeding and protection against possible enemies.

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