

Our national bird more than meets the eye

by Todd and Leah Eskelin



Breakfast time! This snapshot from the City of Kenai Eagle Cam shows mom feeding the two eaglets pieces of a bird she brought back to the nest on May 26, 2018.

If you have not checked out the City of Kenai Eagle Cam you are missing out. This is among the best in the world of online nest cameras. We watched the adults fix up the nest in April. Then we got to see a few unwanted guests come and check out the already claimed nest. Hundreds of people watched in real time as the first and then a second egg were laid. After what seemed like an eternity, but barely more than a month, both eggs eventually hatched a few hours apart.

Now almost six weeks old, the rapidly growing chicks are checking off their milestones one after another. Pin feathers have replaced their baby down. They are able to feed themselves from the smorgasbord of birds and fish that mom and dad bring back to the nest. They back up and defecate out of the nest without falling. They have begun exercising their wings. At this point, each eaglet is the size of a volleyball with gangly wings and legs.

They will continue to use the nest until mid-August, so if you want to watch them grow and follow their progress, check out the live webpage at <http://www.kenai.city/eaglecam>. From there you can also look at highlights that were saved to the City of Kenai's YouTube channel.

As you celebrate the Fourth of July, we hope you'll reflect about what the Bald Eagle represents as our national bird. It is a sign of strength and power depicted on every seal representing the United States of America. The Bald Eagle is also one of our greatest conservation success stories—a nation coming together to ensure wild populations persist for future generations to enjoy.

The Bald Eagle was clearly headed down the path of extinction, at least in the Lower 48. Dichlorodiphenyl-trichloroethane or DDT was developed in the 1940s as one of the first synthetic insecticides. It was

very effective, and its use became popular across the country to combat insect-borne human diseases like malaria and typhus. Unfortunately, it contaminated fish and other prey that eagles consumed. Although not lethal to adult birds, DDT ultimately caused the egg shells of eagles and many other raptors to become too thin. The eggs literally cracked before the chick was fully developed.

At the same time as this rapid increase in nest failures, the American population was growing and expanding the urban footprint into forested lands. In previous decades, waterfowl and shorebirds were hunted to dangerously low numbers making it difficult for eagles to find appropriate food while nesting. On top of all these hurdles, eagles were being shot as it was believed incorrectly that they preyed upon calves and lambs from the growing livestock industry.

The combination of these factors happening simultaneously was the perfect storm, devastating to Bald Eagles. In the early 18th century, Bald Eagles probably numbered between 300,000 and 500,000 birds. By the 1950s, after the extensive use of DDT and habitat loss, there were only 412 nesting pairs in the 48 contiguous states!

While the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918 provided some protection for the species, it clearly was not enough. In 1940, the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act made it illegal to take, possess, sell, purchase, offer to sell, transport, or import/export live or dead eagles or eagle parts including any part, nest, or egg unless a permit is issued.

Native Americans are able to apply for permits to possess eagle parts used in their cultural traditions. Alaska plays a key role in this process as all dead eagles

are sent to the National Eagle Repository near Denver for distribution to successful applicants, thereby giving people the opportunity to maintain traditions even in areas where few eagles now reside. In fact, Bald Eagles killed on the Kenai Peninsula from electrical transformers or vehicle collisions are sent by Kenai Refuge staff to this repository.

In the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. Department of Agriculture began regulating the use of DDT. Additional regulations followed with the establishment of the Environmental Protection Agency in 1972. Bald Eagles in the Lower 48 were also listed following enactment of the Endangered Species Act in 1973.

Fast forward almost four decades and the Bald Eagle was officially delisted in 2007 due to these new laws and regulations. The number of nesting pairs in the Lower 48 now approaches 10,000!

Now, as “our” eaglets approach taking flight from the nest in mid-August, we wish to highlight another event focusing on Bald Eagles. On Saturday, August 4, beginning at 2:00 pm, the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge is presenting “Bald Eagle Exploration Stations,” a hands-on guided discovery lab for participants of all ages. Join our rangers and be a biologist for a day while exploring eagle anatomy, flight, nesting habits, and more in a rotating series of activity stations. Call the Refuge Visitor Center for more details at 907-260-2820.

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