

Bald Eagles Are Readily Viewable Now!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This weekend was Eagle Days at Milford Lake and the Milford Nature Center. It's always amazing to me how many people, local people, attend that don't realize how many Bald Eagles we have in the Milford Lake/Geary County area! I enjoy the eagles and like to help others better understand this wonderful creature that is our national symbol!

In the 1960s and 70s, Bald Eagle numbers were dropping due to a number of reasons. They were put on the endangered species list to provide even more protection than they already were awarded in an effort to stop the declining numbers and rebuild the population. By the mid 1980s it was apparent that numbers were improving and just a few years ago, 2007, they were removed completely from the endangered species list, a testament to the success of the program.

In the 19th century and early 20th century there were scattered Bald Eagle nests around the state, mainly in eastern Kansas. But by the 1950s there were no longer any successful nests in Kansas. As Bald Eagle numbers continued to climb though, in 1989 the first successful Bald Eagle nest in Kansas in over 40 years fledged young. As of this past year there were nearly 100 Bald Eagle nests in the state, including at least 4 around or near to Milford Lake.

Where Bald Eagles were once a much desired winter sight, they can now be found year round in the state. Numbers do build in the winter as cold weather further north moves birds south. Bald Eagles feed primarily on fish and waterfowl, but are just as likely to feed on carrion from road killed animals. As open water freezes to the north, birds start to move south continuing to look for a source of fish and waterfowl.

Most years, Bald Eagle numbers peak in January. By then, open water to the north has sufficiently frozen over to move most eagles south. Some years when the weather is mild, we won't have as many eagles here because they can continue to find food further north. In harsher winters, the Bald Eagles here will have to move on to southern Kansas or Oklahoma to find adequate open water and food. Bald Eagles are opportunistic. It takes energy to migrate south. They will go only as far as they have to to find enough food until they can head back north.

Our nesting Bald Eagles are getting ready to lay eggs and start incubating in just a few more weeks. Large birds take a long time to incubate and then grow up. The wintering Bald Eagles will start heading back north in February with most of the "visitors" gone by March 1st. Until that time Bald Eagles can be seen around Milford Lake, often just standing on the ice, or flying along the larger rivers.

Bald Eagles don't get their distinctive white head and tails until about four years of age. Until that time, the immatures will have a lot of brown and blotchy feathers. First year birds will often have a lot of white feathers in their belly and wings. As they grow older the amount of white on the body and wings becomes less and less as they then slowly develop their white head and tail. Many people think these young birds are Golden Eagles, but Golden Eagles are quite rare around here. They are a bird of the prairies of western Kansas. Golden Eagles will never have white feathers in their bellies or breast.

If you didn't make it out to Eagle Days on Saturday, don't worry. The eagles will be around for several more weeks. Just take a mid day drive around Milford Lake Dam and you'll probably be able to see the stately Bald Eagle, perched in trees, standing on the ice or flying overhead. Take a few moments to appreciate our national symbol!