

The Eagles Have Landed!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Last weekend the Milford Nature Center hosted their annual Eagle Days at Milford Lake. For a nice change the weather was really pleasant and while Bald Eagle numbers had dropped earlier in the week because Milford Lake had iced over, everyone still had good opportunities to see both adult and immature Bald Eagles.

Bald Eagles are a success story of the Endangered Species Act. In the 1970's you were lucky to see one or two Bald Eagles around Milford Lake in the winter. We've progressed from them being that much of a rarity to having multiple eagle nests not just around the lake but throughout the region. New nests keep appearing every year along rivers and major streams in the area.

The first modern day nesting record of Bald Eagles in Kansas occurred at Clinton Lake in 1989. That nest produced two offspring. The following three years there were two active nests in the state; the Clinton Lake nest and one out in southwest Kansas along the Finney-Hodgeman county line. From there it became a challenge to keep up with all the nests. The first Geary County nest was on Ft. Riley in the Madison Creek area of Milford Lake in 2004. While the nesting attempt the first two years was unsuccessful, the pair finally fledged 2 young in 2006.

We have had a total of six active nests in Geary County as well as two in Clay County around Milford Lake, four in Riley County and one in Dickinson County. We suspect that there are even more than that. Last year 119 active Bald Eagle nests were documented in Kansas with at least 110 eaglets successfully fledged (they grew to the point that they could fly, leave the nest and start to gather food on their own.) The total number was more than that but not all nests were able to be monitored closely enough to know how many fledged from each nest.

We are heading into the prime breeding season for Bald Eagles. While a few nests around the state already appear to have females incubating eggs, February seems to be the main season for egg laying and incubation. Bald Eagles normally lay two eggs, occasionally just one or as many as three. It takes about 39 days for the eggs to hatch and average age (from hatching) for first flight is 77 days. So from the time of egg laying until young eagles are flying strong enough to start learning how to feed themselves is right at four months.

Bald Eagles don't develop their signature white head and tail until they are four years of age. Until then they will be various shades of brown and black with varying amounts of white mottling in the body and wings. Some people think that these are Golden Eagles but Golden Eagles will never have white feathers in their chest and belly region or on their back. Golden Eagles are also very rare this far east in Kansas.

With the number of nests we now have in the region we can expect to see Bald Eagles almost any time of the year. Numbers do swell in the winter as birds to the north come south looking for open water for fishing and good number of ducks and geese. These three items make up the majority of their food along with scavenging off of a dead deer. The wintering birds will start heading north in February and March with most migrant eagles gone by early April.

The best place to view Bald Eagles is near water so Milford Lake is an excellent area. There is a Bald Eagle nest east of the Milford Fish Hatchery, just north of the west end of the Gathering Pond below the dam. The nest is in plain view and can be easily watched from a safe distance so as not to disturb the eagles as they start another nesting season.