

Where Are the Eagles?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This is the time of year that we are normally hosting Eagle Days at Milford Lake. That event in 2021 was yet another victim of the ongoing pandemic. But perhaps it is just as well as Bald Eagle numbers around Milford Lake are well below what we have come to expect over the past ten or fifteen years. More than once, in recent weeks, I have had someone ask me, "Where are the eagles?"

In the early 1980s you could drive around Milford Lake on a winter afternoon and feel fortunate if you saw 3 or 4 Bald Eagles. But as we moved into the 1990s and eagle numbers really started increasing, you could find several dozen in a trip around the lake. If the upper end of the lake had iced over, you might see 30 or 40 concentrated around the dam and outlet area and in some amazing instances you might see a couple dozen in one tree, usually in adverse weather conditions. Once Bald Eagles started nesting at Milford Lake, in 2004, it became likely to see eagles virtually any day of the year.

The big increase in winter time eagle numbers is from an influx of birds that nest to the north. Bald Eagles preferred food is fish and waterfowl but they also have no qualms about eating carrion from virtually any source. It takes tremendous energy for birds to migrate and truly does put them at risk. The further they have to migrate, the more energy it takes. As open water ices up the eagles move south. They will continue to move south so they have open water that will allow them to catch fish or the waterfowl that congregate there. The highest numbers of eagles that we have seen in the area are when all the water to the north is iced over and Milford Lake has iced over or almost iced over. At those times there have been over 300 Bald Eagles counted leaving overnight roosts along the Kansas River. If it stays cold, these eagles then start to head further south in search of open water.

In recent years, winters have been warmer and ice cover locally and further north has been absent or limited. With open water to be found north of us, the eagles can stay closer to their nesting areas putting them at less risk during migration and allowing them to more easily return to their nesting locations. I periodically check a map of ice cover on lakes in Nebraska maintained by Nebraska ice fisherman. A recent check of that map showed that there's still a lot of open water in Nebraska. Open water in Nebraska equates to fewer Bald Eagles in Kansas.

Let's be clear though, there are still Bald Eagles around Milford Lake. In recent weeks I've seen several pairs tending nests around the lake. They'll start laying eggs and incubating within the next few weeks. Many of these nests are intentionally placed by the eagles to be well away from people and possible disturbance. But eagles are still here. Keep in mind that Bald Eagles do not gain their full white head and tail until they are about 4 years of age. Golden Eagles are rare in our part of the state and the eagles you see without white heads are most likely immature Bald Eagles.

If you go out looking for Bald Eagles, some good place to check are the outlet area below the dam. One of the eagle nests is located there. Always check the big cottonwood and oak trees in any of the coves. Checkout the boat ramp area at the State Park marina and the boat ramp area at East Rolling Hills. Please remember not to approach them too closely. Your best viewing opportunity is often staying in your car and using it as a blind!