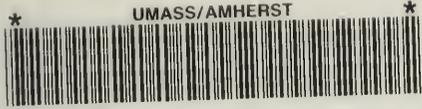


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Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

It is a sad comment on America that our national bird, the bald eagle, was unprotected until 1940. Today, it is among the most strictly protected forms of wildlife, and anyone who kills or even harasses an eagle is subject to arrest, heavy fines and imprisonment. Eagles have lost habitat to development, been poisoned by pesticides in the food chain, shot and electrocuted by power lines. Even eagle admirers unintentionally harass the birds as they try to get "just a little closer" with their cameras and binoculars. As a result, eagles have not nested in Massachusetts since 1910.

When the colonists first arrived in Massachusetts, they found eagles breeding throughout the state, particularly on Cape Cod where fish, the eagle's favored food, were available all year round. But settlements increased, timber was cut, land cleared, rivers dammed, and the wilderness, along with much of its fish and wildlife, disappeared. In the ignorance of the time, most people were glad to see eagles removed from the landscape, as any bird of prey was regarded as a potential livestock killer. Some people actually believed that eagles would carry off babies and small children!

Faced with persecution, and pollution, eagle numbers declined drastically and nest-



Photos: Bill Byrne

ing eagles vanished from many states, including Massachusetts. But there was still plenty of good habitat for nesting in the deep South and to the North. Southern bald eagles visited Massachusetts during May and June, while northern birds were fairly common throughout the year, especially during the winter.

Then came modern civilization and technology. Increasing development, a growing human population, and the pollution of the food chain by DDT and similar chemicals took a further toll.

Today four or five eagles remain around Quabbin Reservoir throughout the year, another three dozen or so spend part of the winter there, and the coastal areas of the state support an odd visitor or two and seasonally up to a dozen.

In 1979, the National Wildlife Federation through its Raptor Information Center, initiated the

first nationwide survey of wintering bald eagles. Massachusetts has participated in this count every year. To date, our wintering eagle population, not including a few golden eagles has been as follows: 1979 - 8; 1980 - 26; 1981 - 19; 1982 - 13; 1983 - 23; 1984 - 25; 1985 - 28; 1986 - 54; 1987 - 43. In conjunction with data from other states, these figures help reveal national population trends. These populations are gradually increasing in the Northeast.

Phase two of the eagle project began in the spring of 1982 when the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, backed by a grant from the Massachusetts Audubon Society, constructed a caged, artificial nest platform on the shore of Quabbin Reservoir. Two young eagles were flown in from Michigan with the help of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and were raised on the platform. These young birds — and all of those raised in the tower subsequently — were taken from separate wild nests containing two or more young.

The birds raised on the platform are cared for in such a way that they retain their wild instincts. This release technique, known as "hacking", allows the birds to become imprinted on their new home, but keeps them from becoming tame and imprinted on their human protectors. Upon release, the young

eagles may travel for hundreds of miles. Eventually, it is hoped that they will return to the area to nest and raise young of their own. It takes four to five years for an eagle to reach maturity and acquire the distinctive white head and tail.

In 1983, no eaglets were available from the lower 48 states, but through the efforts of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, a cooperative agreement was reached between the U.S. and Canada. This allowed the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to accept birds from the Canadian Provinces and turn them over to individuals in "hacking" projects. That year, four fledglings were raised at Quabbin. Just prior to release they were examined, banded fitted with a visible wing marker and a tiny radio transmitter and released. In 1984, Massachusetts received six young eagles from Nova Scotia. For the next three years, Nova Scotia provided eight young eagles each year to assist the program bringing the number of birds to 34.

Not all of the birds had easy sailing or even survived. One eagle was recovered in New York suffering from mercury poisoning and had to be euthanized; another died of a bacterial infection. One eagle was found injured by shot pellets, another turned up in a trap. Both were treated at Tufts University School of Veterinary Medicine and re-released.

In 1986, it was decided to extend the project beyond the original five years. Birds would be raised and released (eight each year) through 1989 unless a natural nest is discovered. If nesting takes place, further hacking will be discontinued and the progress of the resident population will be monitored.

Most people, even those who have never seen a bald eagle, can identify the adult bird on sight. It stands about three feet high, has a dark brown body with a white head, neck and tail, and a wingspan of up to seven feet. As in most birds of prey, females are larger than males. Young eagles look quite different. They are dark brown and often streaked and spotted white, and do not assume adult coloration until their fourth or fifth year.

Although bald eagles sometimes take such prey as waterfowl, they are primarily fishermen and scavengers preferring fish to all other foods, and rarely taking residence far from a large body of water. They usually catch their own food, but have nothing against stealing from an otter, gull, merganser or osprey.

The eagles which winter at

Quabbin are unusual in that they rely heavily on deer carcasses for food. Deer which have been chased onto the ice by dogs or coyotes often fall and never get up again. The eagles have learned to take advantage of this dependable food source. They leave their night roosts before sunrise and make their way to the nearest carcass where they feed until mid-morning. In late afternoon, they usually return for another feeding, and then head back to their roosts for the night.

If you would like to see an eagle, Quabbin offers the best chance. Eagle numbers usually peak during February and March, then taper off as the ice goes out. The best place from which to watch the Quabbin eagles is the Enfield Look-out, just off Route 9 in Belchertown. A spotting scope or powerful binoculars are a necessity. Do not attempt to get closer to the eagles. They will not tolerate a human's approach, even at a distance of several hundred yards. The attempt would interfere with the eagle's feeding, spoil the opportunity for other bird watchers, put undue stress on the bird, and could make you subject to arrest.