

The Bald Eagle in Illinois

How research and winter population counts are helping this endangered species

by Sheryl De Vore

Icy rain pelted slick roads in Rock Island as we drove toward Credit Island along the Mississippi River 9 a.m. on 2 January 1993 searching for wintering Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). The weather forecast was dismal - sleet and freezing rain all day making for hazardous conditions. We wondered how active the eagles might be in such weather.

Driving slowly, windshield wipers going, we noticed the river on our right and an island of red oaks, cottonwoods, and grass on our left. Then we saw it, there on the grass, dark body sandwiched between white head and white tail, an adult Bald Eagle feeding on a skunk carcass. We stopped the car. The eagle raised its head, then flew across our path and landed in an oak, its eyes gazing over the river. Almost magically, the sleet turned to snow. The eagle perched quietly, white snow melding into white feathers.

We saw 40 eagles in two days in the Rock Island area that New Year's weekend 1993. But most memorable was the striking image of the eagle in the snow, a testimony to the fact that through the efforts of state organizations and researchers, this state and federally-endangered bird continues to winter in Illinois; its numbers possibly even increasing.

Between 1,300 and 1,400 Bald Eagles winter in Illinois annually, more than in any state other than Alaska (Illinois Audubon, winter 1989-90). At an important eagle wintering site, Lock and Dam 14 near the Elton E. Fawks Bald Eagle Refuge

(formerly the Oak Valley Eagle Refuge), up to 120 eagles spend winter nights on the 173 acres of forested ravines (Friederici, 1992). Far to the south, on a January morning in 1993, more than 150 eagles were seen feeding along the Mississippi River backwaters near Lock and Dam 26 near the towns of Alton, Winfield, and Clarksville (Fargo, 1993). Cedar Glen Eagle Roost and wintering area at Lock and Dam No. 19 is today one of the largest eagle wintering sites in the country (The Conservator, Winter 1990,91).

Part of the eagle's success in Illinois has to do with the elimination of the pesticide DDT in 1972 as well as work being done by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), the Illinois Endangered Species Protection Board (IESPB), the Illinois Nature Conservancy, and Western Illinois University. Professionals associated with these organizations have worked to provide essential wintering and nesting habitat for the eagles. They continue to conduct winter population and nesting counts and to research the biology and habits of these majestic raptors.

Bald Eagles arrive in Illinois beginning sometime in late September or early October. They remain through March or early April, with peak numbers in January and February. Adults are characterized by their white head, yellow beak and eyes, white tail, and dark body; immatures range from mostly dark to dark with splotches of white as they grow to adulthood (See Field Identification article in this issue).

In 1889, the Bald Eagle was a

common bird along larger water courses in Illinois and could be found at any time of the year (Bohlen, 1989). Eagles nested in Illinois in such areas as Lake, Marshall, Alexander, Gallatin, and Hamilton Counties. Some of the eagles which nested along lakes and rivers in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan migrated in winter to open water areas along the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers in Illinois.

But in the middle 1900s, scientists and bird watchers became concerned about the Bald Eagle. "One Illinois resident, Elton Fawks, a naturalist and conservationist from the Quad Cities, became alarmed in the early 1960s about the declining number of eagles along the Mississippi River," said Sue Lauzon, executive director of the IESPB. Fawks, who was proclaimed Eagle Man of Illinois by Gov. James Thompson "was one of those who sounded the national alarm and speculated that the eagle's decline had to do with pesticides," said Lauzon.

Fawks, along with Dr. Thomas C. Dunstan, biology professor at Western Illinois University, Macomb, and others identified and researched the eagle wintering area near Lock and Dam 19 in west-central Illinois and found it to be a vital component in the preservation of the Bald Eagle in Illinois (Illinois Audubon, Winter 1989-90). In 1970, Cedar Glen Eagle Roost, an 182-acre night roost was purchased by the Illinois Chapter of the Nature Conservancy and became the nation's first protected and managed area specifically for Bald Eagles, said Dunstan.