The Illinois Department of Conservation in 1976 got involved sponsoring a "Dimes for Eagles" program in which school children donated dimes for the Prairie State Eagle Refuge Project. The money helped pay to protect shoreline foraging and feeding areas for eagles. In 1978, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Illinois Department of Conservation, USFWS, Illinois and Iowa Departments of Transportation, and WIU professors worked together to find a way to replace a dilapidated interstate bridge across the Mississippi while having minimum impact on the eagles.

Other Illinois wintering eagle habitats have also been protected. Oak Valley was purchased in the wake of the threat of timber harvest of large cottonwoods to make way for a motel. Elton Fawks and a small army of concerned citizens along with the Nature Conservancy and the NWF got involved and saved the area.

Winter Counts

In the late 1970s the IESPB began conducting wintering eagle counts incidental to official waterfowl counts. "The most accurate and specific counts began in 1988 when the board hired a pilot to fly two spotters over the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers to count eagles once annually," said Lauzon of the endangered species protection board. The aerial count is done annually between 1 January and 15 January in conjunction with a nationwide program sponsored by the NWF.

"We fly from 6:30 a.m. until the light is fading," said Lauzon. "It can take two to two and a half days to complete the aerial count." They fly from the Wisconsin bor-

der along the Mississippi River to Cairo in extreme southern Illinois. They also fly over the Illinois River beginning upstream from Starved Rock State Park and ending at the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers at Pere Marquette State Park, another excellent place to watch eagles in winter (Bohlen, 1989).

"Being up in the air and searching for eagles is exhilarating," said Lauzon. "You're flying along, there's one bird here and one bird there, then nothing for a while, and then suddenly you see a large group of 15 or 20. No matter how many we spot in one location, every eagle I see I think that is wonderful."

Amid the sense of wonder is a sense of danger. The counters fly low between 300 and 500 feet. The air is more turbulent the closer they get to the ground, but they have to stay low over the river to see the birds perched on the trees. They also meander

through the backwaters and sloughs, areas that can not be covered by foot.

"It is a little scary," said Lauzon. "There are a lot of power lines in the way. The pilot has to be alert. We have had some times when we came closer to power lines than I would have liked. Sometimes we have to play leap frog. We fly low, see a power line, go up and then back down, see a bridge, and we're back up again. It's like riding a roller coaster."

The spotters have learned that eagles prefer sitting on trees at the tip of an island. "Perhaps the current is faster there and makes for good fishing."

Although IESPB has not done the survey long enough to show any real trends, "there is no question that numbers of wintering eagles in Illinois are steadily increasing," said Lauzon (Table 1). Other surveys show similar results. Surveys done by the Illinois Natural History Survey showed a count of 63 eagles in January in 1960 to 1,217 in 1986 (Havera and Kruse). Numbers of wintering eagles have also steadily been rising for the nation (Table 2). In 1979, the national winter count was 9,815 eagles and in 1992, the count was 16,340. Some of this trend may be attributed to more and better surveys, but some also to population increases.

Although migration patterns of immatures are erratic, an upward trend in the numbers of immatures wintering in Illinois is also evident according to data. Still, Dunstan cautions that the numbers indicate that a third of the population is immatures. "A healthy population has more young than old," he said. A 50/50 ratio would be more promising," he said.

Dr. Thomas C. Dunstan does research on the Bald Eagle at Western Illinois University in Macomb.