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Bald eagles take up residence here

In a first for Allegheny County, pair sets up nest in Crescent

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By John Hayes, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The bald eagle's return from the brink of regional extinction is one of Pennsylvania's greatest conservation triumphs. But on Thursday, a pair of eagles that have set up a nest in Allegheny County were a no-show for their photo op.

Despite precautions, including attempts to observe the birds from some 400 yards across a valley, no one was home when members of the Pennsylvania Game Commission shuttled reporters to the first confirmed eagle nest in Allegheny County in decades. At the request of the commission, the specific location of the nest, atop a white ash tree in Crescent, is being withheld to keep people away from the site.

The nesting pair have been observed sporadically at the site for several weeks. Wildlife Conservation Officer Gary Fujak said their attempt to reproduce this year may have failed, but they could return next year to try again.

"We believe this is a resident pair, not migrating eagles, and by the size of the nest [about 4 feet in diameter] it may have been built last year, but we didn't know about it," he said. "It sometimes takes several years for eagles to successfully breed, and the fact that they're only sighted here sometimes may indicate that this is a failed nesting site."

Eagles can weigh up to 14 pounds; their wingspan can stretch to 7 feet. Females grow larger than the males, and both sexes attain their distinctive white heads and tails at 5 years of age. Courtship occurs in winter, and while it is not conclusive they are believed to bond for life. One to three eggs are laid from February through April and hatch in the spring. Bald eagles can live up to 30 years.

A landowner across a valley from the Allegheny County nesting site, who asked not to be identified to help protect the location, said he was at first startled by the fly-over of a bird with a 6-foot wingspan.

"It's like a pterodactyl flying over," he said. "To be on the outskirts of a city like Pittsburgh, known for its industry and steel mills, and to have this wildlife, it's unique."

Tom Fazi, education and information officer of the Game Commission's southwest regional office, called it "pretty cool."

"It's a testament to the fact that the [Allegheny County] ecosystem has recovered to the point that these birds could even live here in the first place," he said. "This would have been unheard of a few years ago. They have an excellent source of food with fish from the river nearby, and since they returned to the nest this year we believe they're comfortable with the distant presence of people."

As human populations expand into more remote areas, human-animal contacts are on the rise. But Mr. Fazi said this case is unusual because it's the eagles who are encroaching on a human population center.

Todd Katzner, the National Aviary's director of conservation, said eagles have been sighted in Allegheny County for several years, but this is the first confirmed nesting site. Editor and co-author of the newly published book, "The Eagle Watchers" (Cornell University Press), Mr. Katzner said the eagles' commitment to the county marks a milestone in the region's environmental recovery.

"They've been around, it's not unusual to see them, but to have eagles engaged in breeding behavior and building the next generation here is a new kettle of fish," he said. "This suggests the birds have reached a level of acceptance of humans, and there's a sufficiently high population density of other eagles in nearby counties, that they feel it's better to be around us than in the other eagles' territories."

Through the 1950s and 1960s, the lingering presence of DDT and other chemicals throughout the food chain devastated populations of bald eagles and other avian predators across the country. In 1980, Pennsylvania had only three nesting pairs.

Their Pennsylvania recovery began in 1983 when the state acquired eaglets from Saskatchewan, Canada, and stocked them at nesting sites near Harrisburg and Pymatuning. Following a national trend, the birds rebounded. By 2000, 48 eagle nests were confirmed in Pennsylvania.

The bald eagle was removed from the federal Endangered Species Act in 2006, but it remains protected through the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940, which mandates heavy fines for individuals and companies that bother the birds. Killing, injuring and harassing the animals is prohibited -- with a few exceptions, even the possession of eagle feathers is banned.

Today, said Mr. Fazi, more than 150 eagle nests are in the state.

It's unknown if the Allegheny County eagles are descended from the stocked Canadian birds or are migrants from other areas.

"We don't care," said Mr. Fazi. "It's enough that we know our program was successful."