



Bald eagle chick first born in Pittsburgh in more than 200 years, experts say



A male eagle returns to the Hays nest after a couple hours of hunting on April 11, 2013. He is clutching food in his talons to deliver to his mate who is busy incubating eggs at the nest.

By **Mary Ann Thomas**

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A bald eagle chick hatched in a nest in Hays, making it the first one born in Pittsburgh in more than 200 years, bird experts said Sunday.

The chick's parents soar above an unlikely landscape of a scrap recycling yard and two sets of active railroad lines, along a segment of the Three Rivers Heritage Trail near the Monongahela River.

"Where are the chocolate cigars?" asked ornithologist Bob Mulvihill, as proud as a new papa.

Mulvihill and Roy Bires, 64, of Swissvale are among a group of monitors who have put in hundreds of hours during the past two months watching and noting each step in the process, from building up a nest to incubating eggs. One even marked the time the eagles copulated.

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The chick cannot be seen because the nest, called an aerie, is so large; some reach 10 feet wide and 8 feet deep and weigh as much as a ton. Researchers verify a youngster's presence by the parents' feeding behavior.

The magical moment came just before noon: The male flew into the aerie carrying a small mammal and fed it to what must be a newly hatched eaglet, Mulvihill said.

Cyclists and walkers alike shouted "Are they up there?" curious about the eagles' whereabouts as Mulvihill and Bires handed them their binoculars for a closer look.

The chick is unlikely to be visible for several weeks. If all goes well, the bird would fledge, or leave the nest, in early July, experts say. However, young eagles face a variety of threats in an urban area, including flying into power lines and being hit while they feed on carrion along highways or rail lines.

For the first time in recent memory, three pairs of bald eagles have nests along each of the county's three main rivers: in Harmar along the Allegheny, in Crescent along the Ohio and in Hays along the Monongahela. The Crescent eagles had a chick last year.

The area's industrial history prevented eagles from nesting in the city proper for decades.

"Surrounding forested hillsides near the rivers would have been largely denuded by the turn of the 19th century in the 1800s, if not before," Mulvihill said.

The rivers yielded few fish, a prime ingredient in the bald eagle diet.

For example, during a survey on Monongahela River in 1967, one scientist could find only one bluegill, according to Bob Ventorini, three rivers biologist for the state Fish and Boat Commission.

As efforts to clean the waterways took effect over the past 30 years, 76 species of fish have been found in the Monongahela, he said.

Other metropolitan areas across the country with nesting bald eagles include Washington, Minneapolis and Philadelphia.

"It's happening more frequently, but it's not a massive trend," said Peter Nye, a retired wildlife biologist from the New York Department of Environmental Conservation who lives just outside of Albany.

Nye designed the country's first eagle re-establishment programs in 1975, including Pennsylvania's reintroduction efforts.

Some pristine, desirable areas such as wild rivers have reached saturation of the birds, he said.

Nye said the eagles' presence in Pittsburgh is an encouraging sign.

"It means statewide that the eagle population is doing well and that there is a good food supply," Nye said.

Higher quality watersheds in southwestern Pennsylvania can now support bald eagles, said Douglas Gross, state game commission wildlife biologist.

"I anticipate that we will find more eagle nests along rivers where there are not as many people watching," Gross said. "If they are near Pittsburgh, they may also be elsewhere."

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