



Return of the raptors to Pittsburgh

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In an undisclosed location, not far from the Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, eagles nest.

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To the excitement of birders and environmentalists, [a pair of bald eagles have made their nest](#) in a white ash tree in Crescent, a community not far from Pittsburgh International Airport. While eagles have been seen in the area for several years now, this is the first confirmed nesting in many decades. To discourage the crowds of curiosity seekers who might annoy the birds, the exact location of the nest is being kept secret.

As most people know, by the 1950's, [the bald eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*](#), had almost become extinct in the lower 48 states. Then in 1962, [Rachel Carson](#) published *Silent Spring*, which raised the alarm about the harmful effects of DDT, a

common pesticide in those days, on avian reproduction. Carson showed that in certain species, eagles among them, DDT caused the birds to produce eggs with dangerously brittle shells. Despite fierce attacks by Monsanto and other pesticide manufacturers, her book became a best-seller and her views ultimately prevailed. The bald eagle population slowly increased and then in 2007, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* was removed from the Endangered Species list.

Another species particularly susceptible to the reproductive toxicity of DDT is the peregrine falcon. As reported in an earlier post, a pair is nesting successfully on the Cathedral of Learning in Oakland, while another pair resides in downtown Pittsburgh. That eagles are nesting in Crescent and sixteen miles away (as the crow flies) peregrine falcons are hatching eggs is a measure of the success of Pittsburgh's environmental efforts and a tribute to Rachel Carson, who is, of course, a local heroine (Chatham College, class of 1929).

This local avian triumph provides particular comfort right now when we are faced with the horrors of the [British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico](#), which may turn out be the worst environmental disaster in U.S. history. The effects of the spill are devastating to marine life and shore birds, of

course, but it is also feared that song birds, on their spring migrations, will be affected -- a somber thought for tomorrow, May 8, International Migratory Bird Day.