

Eyeing eagles Survey counts 8 bald eagles on lower Rock River

JANESVILLE

An eager birdwatcher pointed her spotting scope along the Rock River shoreline near Janesville's Monterey Dam on Sunday.

She scanned several tall trees. She searched up and down open water. She studied a clump of barren branches.

After several minutes, she packed up her scope and stomped back to her car.

"No eagles," she muttered, in disappointment.

Above-freezing temperatures in recent days have opened more water on the river, making it harder to find the bald eagles that have been hanging out in the city.

But one thing is certain: More of the great raptors are wintering on the river from Newville south to the Illinois state line.

Brian Buenzow of the state Department of Natural Resources counted eight during the Midwinter Waterfowl Survey last week.

"That's a record," he said. "The number has been going up a little every year."

Bald eagles can be seen circling the Bellrichard Bridge in Janesville, fishing near the Indianford Dam or nestled in the high branches of old oaks near the river in Newville.

"We are seeing more and more eagles," Buenzow said. "Everywhere there's a dam, there's at least one eagle waiting for fish for dinner. Downtown Janesville is as good a place as any to see them."

He conducted the annual waterfowl survey Jan. 8, when frigid temperatures left much of the river frozen.

"There was less open water than I have ever seen in all the years I have been doing this," said Buenzow, who began with the DNR in 1982. "When there is little open water, the eagles are concentrated into smaller spaces around food sources."

He remembers when no eagles were anywhere on the river.

“Today, we have several pairs breeding in Rock County,” Buenzow said. “They’ve been on Lake Koshkonong for about 10 years. It’s a great wildlife comeback story.”

With bald eagles thriving, it is easy to forget that Wisconsin once came perilously close to losing them. In the early 1970s, the state had only 82 nesting pairs, and their numbers were in a free fall.

A big part of the eagle’s demise was the pesticide DDT. The chemical caused the bird to lay soft-shelled eggs, which broke before hatching. As a result, the raptor was put on the federal and state endangered species list. In 1971, Wisconsin banned the use of DDT, and the state set a recovery goal of 360 nesting pairs.

The birds have long since surpassed the number.

Last year, Wisconsin had breeding adults on 1,344 nests, said DNR avian ecologist Sumner Matteson.

“Eagles occupy nests in 67 of the state’s 72 counties,” he said.

Vilas County in northern Wisconsin has the largest number with 144 nests, and Oneida County is close behind with 134 nests.

The state’s bald eagle population is so healthy that the bird has been taken off federal and state endangered species lists. It continues to be protected federally under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and The Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

In addition, wildlife officials say eagles need human help to protect their dwindling nesting, roosting and feeding habitat so they will continue to thrive.

“The birds are doing very well now,” Matteson said, “especially in the last 20 years, when they have occupied more lakes and rivers. They have rebounded from the days when they suffered from the effects of DDT.”

As the eagle population grows, young birds move to new territories in southern Wisconsin. Surprisingly, they seem to be more tolerant of people than anyone ever expected .

“In some cases, they have gotten used to the presence of people,” Matteson said. “But that does not mean people should approach the birds or a nesting tree. Disturbing birds on a nest can cause the nest to fail. It’s always best to view them from a distance. Use a spotting scope or binoculars.”

A bald eagle perches in a tree Saturday above the Rock River near Racine Street in Janesville. According to a spokesman for the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, the number of the great raptors wintering on the Rock River continues to increase.

