

Bald Eagles Are A Common Sight

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It may surprise some people that Bald Eagles are now considered a year round resident of our area. This past year we had four active eagle nests around Milford Lake and along the Kansas River. While winter time can certainly bring a lot more eagles to the area, don't be surprised to see them anytime of year around the lake or any of our larger rivers.

Bald Eagles are the poster child of success for the endangered species act. By the 1950s and early 1960s, Bald Eagle numbers in the lower 48 had dropped so low that seeing any eagle was cause for excitement. But with reductions in industrial pollution in rivers, changes in the pesticides that were being used and some additional protection offered by the endangered species act, by the late 1970s, Bald Eagle numbers started to rebound.

In the early 1980s, you could find a few eagles around the lake during the winter, sometimes as many as a dozen. By the late 1980s I can remember one grand winter morning when a quick tour around the lake turned up 36. On a recent chilly day, I counted over 140 eagles standing on the ice scattered across the main body of the lake. In the late 1980s, the first Bald Eagles in over a century nested in Kansas. In recent years we have routinely seen over 50 successful Bald Eagle nests in Kansas and apparent nesting activity has been observed in nearly 100 locations around the state. So to say that Bald Eagles have made a comeback is an understatement!

Bald Eagle numbers soar in the winter as birds that nest further north move south. Bald Eagles eat primarily fish and waterfowl but also have no qualms about scavenging on road kill as well. As ducks and geese move south, and open water ices over, they keep moving south. But migration takes a lot of energy so they go only as far as they need to to be near open water. Last winter was very mild. It was so mild that many reservoirs and rivers in Nebraska and Iowa never froze over and the number of Bald Eagles wintering in Kansas was quite low.

This year has been a much colder year. Bald Eagle numbers have been quite high of late. Bald Eagles tend to spend nights in large communal roosts in large trees near the rivers. Two such roosts are known and monitored in our area and the middle of last week, each roost was hosting well over 100 eagles each. Unfortunately, the bitter cold weather has frozen over all of Milford Lake and numbers have dropped as these birds headed further south.

One point of confusion that we see each year is differentiating between Bald Eagles and Golden Eagles. Golden Eagles are birds of the prairies and are VERY rare around here and rarely hang around lakes and rivers. They are more likely to be found in the western third of Kansas. Bald Eagles don't get their distinctive white head and tail until they are about 4 years old. Until then they are a mottled brown and white. If there are any white feathers in the chest and belly region of an eagle, it is a Bald Eagle. Essentially, if you see an eagle around Milford Lake or the area rivers, just assume that it is a Bald Eagle.

Next Saturday, January 18th, the annual Eagle Days will be held at Milford Lake at the Milford Nature Center. There will be programs through the day from 9:30 to 3:30 with guided bus trips at 10 and 11 a.m. and 12, 1, 2 and 3:30 p.m., leaving from the Nature Center. All events are free and open to the public and provide a great opportunity to learn more about these awesome birds and see them in the wild. Plan to come on out and enjoy the day!