



DAVID PURDY/SUN HERALD

The eagle population has been slowly increasing over the last 10 to 15 years.

Posted on Mon, Jan. 15, 2007

NEST EGG

As the eagles soar, the population is growing

By MARY PEREZ

SUN HERALD

JACKSON COUNTY – Pascagoula River Audubon Center Director Mark LaSalle said he first saw an eagle soaring over the Pascagoula River in mid-December.

"There's eagles around," he alerted an Ocean Springs family as they set out on a boat tour from the center. While on the river, they spotted not one, but two eagles.

"It doesn't get much better than this," he told the family, but it did. He decided to follow the birds back to the nest with his binoculars, and

realized they were sitting on an egg.

"They're sitting in a pine tree there," he said, and typical of eagles, the nest is at the top of the tree.

"It's a huge nest," he said. The nest is twice the size of an osprey nest, and through a scope LaSalle watches the birds swap places several times a day.

December and January are typically nesting season for eagles in Mississippi, and LaSalle said he knows of only about a half dozen nests on the Coast.

Bald eagles usually have two eggs, with a gestation of 20 to 22 days. It will be six to eight weeks before the chicks are ready to leave the nest and spread their wings.

As adults, "they're absolutely gorgeous," LaSalle said. A juvenile bald eagle doesn't get its distinctive white head until it's 3 or 4 years old, making them hard to identify when the eagles are small.

The fact bald eagles are nesting along the Pascagoula River shows that the river system is healthy.

"This is a good sign," LaSalle said.

The eagle population has been slowly increasing over the last 10 to 15 years, he said, and he's seeing lots of osprey, pelicans and other birds.

"The birds of prey are very abundant," he said, adding that insect-eating birds are down and the results of the 2006 Mississippi Coast Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count are hard to explain.

The counts are conducted in December by experienced bird-watchers in fixed areas in Jackson and Hancock counties. They have been doing it for about 25 years.

LaSalle said Jackson County was down by another half dozen species this year, beyond the 10 species missing last year after Hurricane Katrina.

"We're not really sure why," LaSalle said. "There weren't as many people out this year. I think part of this year's drop in Jackson County is somewhat related to that.

"I know we rebounded in Harrison County," LaSalle said, after they spotted about 10 species that have returned of the 21 that were missing last year after the storm.

In Hancock County, there was good news.

Last December they counted only one clapper rail in Hancock County and, "this year they were everywhere," LaSalle said.

They're also seeing more red-tail hawks, which soar on the thermals in the north all summer, flying just above the marshes along the Coast in the winter.

LaSalle said coastal Mississippi has four bird populations: resident birds that stay all year; wintering birds that migrate down from the north; come-back birds like ruby-throated hummingbirds and swallow-tailed kites that nest on the Coast in the summer and migrate to South America in the winter; and birds that migrate through the spring and fall but don't stay.

With such a varied population of birds, the local Audubon Society is very active. LaSalle said Gautier had the highest number of participants in the county in the Great Backyard Bird Count the year before Katrina and the highest number in the state last year.

This is the tenth year for the count, which will be held Feb. 16-19 throughout the United States and Canada. LaSalle said to those who want to participate that now is the time to begin feeding birds to attract them to a yard or school. He will also present seminars during January to help Coast residents learn to identify birds.

Great Backyard Bird Count

Feb. 16-19.

Beginner to experienced can participate.

For information and to register, go to [www.birdsource.org](http://www.birdsource.org) or [www.msaudubon.org](http://www.msaudubon.org)

### An expert's view

Nick Winstead, state ornithologist, said there are about 40 known eagles' nests in Mississippi. About 25 percent of those are along the Coast, he said, with one in Hancock County, three he is aware of in Harrison County and four or five in Jackson County, including this new nest.

He's encouraged by the numbers, saying, "They're going up," and eagles whose nests were blown down by Katrina have re-nested. He asks anyone who sees eagles to report to him at the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science in Jackson at (601) 354-7303.

<http://www.sunherald.com/mld/sunherald/16462719.htm>

© 2007 The Sun Herald and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved.  
<http://www.sunherald.com>