

## BALD EAGLE NEST WITH YOUNG IN SOUTHERN SASKATCHEWAN

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On June 11, 2005, the first Bald Eagle nest with young, in at least 100 years, was confirmed for southern Saskatchewan. Golden Eagles have been banded along the South Saskatchewan River since 1960 but there have been no reports of Bald Eagle nests with young anywhere in Saskatchewan south of the Aspen Parkland.<sup>3</sup>

Two previous nesting attempts have been reported. In 1987, there was an unsuccessful nesting attempt by Bald Eagles on Lake Diefenbaker near Coldwell Park.<sup>2</sup> In 2004, a pair of Bald Eagles, perhaps the same pair as seen this year, built a nest in a Cottonwood (*Populus deltoides*) on an island where the Red Deer River flows into the South Saskatchewan. The

confluence is approximately 6.4 km east of the Alberta-Saskatchewan border near the Estuary ferry crossing. In 2004, a Bald Eagle sat on that nest through May, but the nest had been abandoned by June 1.

On April 8, 2005, a Bald Eagle was observed on the same nest used in 2004. It was low in the nest, as if incubating eggs. Young eaglets were first observed on June 3, 2005 when Dave Sorenson and I were flying over the area to confirm Golden Eagle nests. On June 11, Dick, Jack, Steve and Carson Clegg and I visited the nest to band the chicks.

The nest was difficult to reach. It is on an island and the peak of the largest flood water from Alberta in ten

years was set to hit Estuary on the day we visited the nest. Kerry Wrishko took us to our launch point on the south side of the river where the railroad used to cross. Where we launched, the pillars (all that is left of the



Figure 1. Pillars of the railroad bridge, June 11, 2005

Dick Clegg





*Figure 2. Cattle on nest island, June 11, 2005*

*Dick Clegg*

railway bridge) crossed what was usually a small side channel that sometimes dries up during the summer. At peak flood, however, the channel alone was wider than the river is usually, and the water swirling and whirlpooling around the pillars was just a little unnerving to a flatlander like me (Figure 1). We pulled and pushed our way through the branches and went out into a side channel with all sorts of debris and even whole trees as company. The current wasn't too fast, so, with four of us paddling, we were able to stay ahead of the junk in the water. The main channel of the South Saskatchewan River was more of the same, just much wider. By aiming for the middle of the island to allow for the current, we were able to hit land a bit upstream from the nest tree which is near the downstream end of the island. Or rather, we arrived where the island used to be. Two days before, I had seen approximately thirty head of range cows and calves on the island. They appeared content, some of them grazing and lying right underneath the nest tree. Now most of the island was under water. The cattle that we saw as we paddled and poled our way through snowberry bushes

were definitely unhappy as they stood in water that was still rising. (Figure 2) Cattle are good swimmers, but not by choice. (Later, I learned from the owner that all the cattle on the island survived the flooding, but that some of them were still

stranded there a month later.)

The nest is in a live Cottonwood with several large trunks. The trunk with the nest is 2 m in diameter at the base (Figure 3). The nest is approximately 15 m above ground, near the top of the canopy, and exposed, since the part of branch above the nest is dead.



*Figure 3. The eagle nest is in the cottonwood trunk on the left*

*Dick Clegg*

There were three nestlings. Comparing them to the photos in an age development chart developed by Gary Bortolotti, he and I estimated that the eaglets were seven to eight weeks old on June 11 (Figure 4). Assuming an average incubation period of 35 days, brooding started in the middle



of March, about a month earlier than Bald Eagles in the Loon Lake area, 200 km to the north, but similar to the start of incubation by Golden Eagles along the South Saskatchewan River.

The larger two eaglets were judged to be female, while the smallest and least developed one was judged to be a male. Determination of sex was based on the size of the tarsi, noted while attaching the bands, and by the fact that females have stouter legs than males.

The young eaglets appeared well fed. There was no food in the nest, but while we watched, one of the adult eagles attempted to land in the nest with prey, a large downy bird with long legs and neck. With an active Great Blue Heron rookery less than a kilometre away to the west, the prey was most likely a heron chick.

Three is a large number of young for this species; just four percent or one out of twenty-five Bald Eagle nests have three eggs, and often one or more of those eggs fail to hatch.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, we were unable to revisit

the nest to determine fledging success.

### Acknowledgements

Kerry Wrishko, conservation officer from Leader, was invaluable in securing a canoe for us from the Leader scout troop, in guiding us to a suitable launching spot, and then picking us up from our downstream landing (he wasn't crazy enough to want to come with us!). Martin Gerard of Saskatoon provided us with five life jackets. The Cleggs of Chilliwack, B.C., were willing to risk a dunking in the semi-arid prairies, and provided the watercraft experience that made the crossing relatively easy.

1. BUEHLER, D. A. 2000. Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*). In: The Birds of North America, No. 506 (A. Poole and F. Gill, eds.). The Birds of North America, Inc., Philadelphia, P.A.
2. ROY, J. F. 1966. Birds of the Elbow. Nature Saskatchewan, Regina.
3. SMITH, A. R. 1996. Atlas of Saskatchewan Birds, Nature Saskatchewan, Regina.



Figure 4. Eaglets in the nest, June 11, 2005

Dick Clegg