



A pair of Bald Eagles rest on partly frozen Klamath Lake while hunting for their favorite food — fish.

Students migrate to eagles' winter refuge

The sun hadn't risen when Survival Center Director Steve Kramer woke everyone Sunday with his booming "good morning." At 5:30 a.m., no one responded kindly to his remark. Only groans chorused back.

But the group had to get up. It had traveled 200 miles Saturday to Oregon's Klamath Basin for an "eagle watch" sponsored by the Survival Center. Only early birds see the eagles as they fly out from their winter roosts to feed.

Heeding Kramer's order to rise, 26 bodies moved sluggishly toward the bus. The first passenger on the bus, James Sayre, peered through wire-rimmed glasses at the other bleary-eyed passengers as they stumbled aboard. With an amused look, he said "They probably get a real laugh out of it."

He meant the eagles, of course. And humans standing beneath a dripping Oregon sky with binoculars and cameras stuck to their faces probably do look funny from an eagle's perspective.

The bus carried the bird watchers to the mouth of Bear Valley, where they observed 53 eagles, stately birds that weigh an average 11 pounds and boast a six-foot wing span.

Poor weather made for poor birdwatching conditions. The whitish clouds made it hard for people to see the high-flying eagles' trademark — a snow white head and tail.

Nonetheless, many group members who had never seen the nation's symbol before — except on the backs of quarters and dollar bills — greeted the sight with cries of excitement and awe.

That's why the Survival Center sponsored the eagle watch, to expose people to a natural beauty and phenomenon, said Matt Holmes, assistant director. Every winter, from December to February, as many as 500 eagles soar from side canyons like Bear Valley to hunt for breakfast.

"It would have been a real nice surprise to have seen 30 of them," said carpenter Allan Porter appreciatively. "I wasn't disappointed with what I saw, but then again I stayed in the bus."

Klamath Basin has the largest wintering bald eagle population in the lower 48 states, said Ralph Opp, Klamath Wildlife Refuge worker.

The basin, located near the California border, attracts eagles for two reasons—the marshy landscape and the other wildlife that make the basin their home-away-from-home. Because 85 percent of western migrating water fowl stop here, the eagles follow their food source.



Observing eagles from the bus was easier than on foot, and unlike the sight of humans, the bus didn't scare them away.

The eagle watchers watched two nesting pairs hunt rodents near Upper Klamath Lake, a favorite hunting ground because of its shallow waters. By this time, the bus was heading back to Eugene and most people, except the few with sharp eyes, had only seen an eagle from far away. The eagles flew warily above the lake and eyed the bus suspiciously.

Though not a predator, an eagle will eat weakened or dead water fowl and rodents. "In the winter time, they take what they can get," Opp explained.

The basin's side canyons provide a nice roost for the picky birds, Opp explained. Eagles nest in old-growth forests where the mature trees sport snags for perching and a heavy protective foilage. Side canyons have much warmer temperatures that make the area more desirable.

Its east and northeast exposures shelters the birds from storms. The canyon's relative inaccessibility keeps curious humans away. If Opp catches any trespassers, he writes them tickets, but says "most people are too lazy to walk that far."

As a member of Oregon's Bald Eagle Management Team, Opp watches eagles carefully. Through his observations, Opp knows how to identify eagle habitat and mannerisms.

For example, eagles live up to 30 years and mate for life. Some observers speculate that eagles from the different regions inter-mate, creating a gene exchange.

Oregon has 100 nesting pairs which live in the state year-round. The Columbia River and the Bend area also are nesting grounds for eagles, Opp said.

Still, Oregon's endangered species list classifies the bird as "threatened," one notch worse than "endangered." Oregon and four other states list the eagles as threatened. Forty-three states list the eagle as endangered.

"He's in pretty good trouble," Opp said. "When the Bald Eagle's in trouble, it's an indicator that something is wrong." Man needs to pay attention to such an indicator, he said. "We share the same habitat."

The state's eagle count keeps improving but the logging industry's axe threatens the population. "They're gonna need more habitat to produce more birds."

The bird's image has flown into the public eye since Congress unanimously declared 1982 as "Year of the Bald Eagle." Two hundred years ago, the bald eagle beat out the turkey to become America's symbol. Ironically, the Endangered Species Act will come under Congress' scrutiny this year and Opp suspects that the tight-fisted legislators may "water it down." That scares him.

"You can't lose by jumping on the bandwagon for the 'Year of the Bald Eagle,'" Opp said ruefully. Then again, "it's not economical to have good wildlife habitat."

How much is an eagle worth? "The forest service can tell me how much a tree is worth," Opp continued. "I can have Boeing build me (an eagle) and then tack a value on it."

"They talk money and we can't understand."



The Survival Center's 'Eagle Warriors.'

Story by Caroline Petrich
Photos by Bob Baker