

Brookville Lake Eagle Rescue

I began photographing a nesting pair of bald eagles on Brookville Lake in Indiana April 2005. The nest produced two offspring that year. Both the adults and the juveniles remained at the lake all winter.

This story begins in January 2006. I made several trips to the nest site to see if there was any activity during the winter months. I did not see the adults or the juveniles at the nest site but could always find them on the lake.



In February, as I was leaving the nest area, I noticed a large nest about two hundred yards east of the 2005 nest. It didn't look big enough to be an eagle nest, however. When I returned at the end of February the nest was twice as large. It didn't look large enough the first time I saw it because the adults were still constructing it.

By the first of March the adults were sitting on eggs. The Department of Natural Resources biologist John Castrale and DNR pilot Dennis Rumley spent several days flying over Indiana lakes and rivers searching for and checking eagle nests. I received an eagle update email from the DNR stating that the Brookville Lake eagle nest had three eggs.

During the month of March I stayed approximately 100 yards from the nest so the adults would not abandon the eggs. We had a rather cold spring with several snowy days. Only once did I approach the nest. This was only to observe how the adults would behave. They would fly off the nest as soon as I got within 75 yards. I waited about five minutes to see if they would return with me that close.

Soon I concluded they were not going to tolerate me being so close. I backed off so they would not leave the eggs unattended in such cold weather.



The location of the new 2006 nest made it very difficult to see from a distance. It was a bit easier in the spring before the leaves grew full on the trees.



Many of the days I spent at the nest in March were just to observe the adults' behavior. During incubation, one parent was always on the nest, not only to keep the eggs warm but to protect them from predators. They would relieve one another about every three hours.

Bald eagles incubate their eggs about 35 days. They begin incubation as soon as the first egg is laid. The second egg usually follows within 36 to 72 hours. It is not uncommon to have a clutch of 3 eggs.

The second week of April I saw the adults returning to the nest with fish and could tell they were feeding babies. By the last week of April I noticed the adults were not always sitting on the hatchlings and the weather was very warm and mild. It was then that I decided to venture

into the woods to get a closer look and examine the backside of the nest. As soon as I saw the nest from the opposite side I had concerns that it might not make it through the entire brooding season. I emailed Brookville Lake Assistant Property Manager, Rebecca Fallat, that the main limb holding the nest was a dead limb.

On April 27, I saw three chicks looking through the sticks of the nest for the first time. It was then that I knew all three eggs had successfully hatched. That was the only time I saw three chicks in the nest.



The entire month of May I only saw two chicks in the nest. They were now almost full grown and sitting up looking out over the nest.

On Thursday, June 2, I left early because a large storm was blowing in. I did not make it to the nest the next day. Saturday, my wife Debbie and I went to photograph them. While hiking into the nest area I stopped to look at

the nest from a distance with binoculars. The leaves had completely filled in and it was difficult to see the nest without getting close. I knew a good spot to stand to get a peek through the leaves. I looked and looked but could not see the nest through the leaves. Eventually, I got the feeling the nest had fallen.



We hurried into the woods only to find the nest had fallen into the creek during the storm and had washed entirely away. We could not find one remaining limb.

We looked around on the ground for the chicks and after about a minute we found two immature eagles safe on shore about forty feet from the bank. One was standing on a log and the other was sitting on the ground. There were fish remains next to them. The adults had been feeding and tending to them on the ground.



Deb and I hurried back to the truck to call Rebecca to tell her what had happened. She called Drs. Dave and Jill Russell, professors at Miami University in Oxford, OH. Dave and Jill are bird banders and directors of the nonprofit Avian Research and Education Institute, Inc. They met us at the nest site with two large pet carriers. Dave carefully picked up each baby while his wife Jill and Rebecca checked them for injuries. There were no broken wings or apparent injuries. Each bird was carefully placed in a carrier. The way they handled the eaglets was amazing. Of course we had to take time out for a photo opt.



The next day, Dave took the eaglets to Glen Helen at Yellow Springs, OH, a raptor rehabilitation center. That same day Debbie and I went back to the nest area to check on the adults. They were circling relentlessly looking for their babies. They were covering about a half mile radius of the nest site.



Rebecca had been in close contact with John Castrale who told her they had flown over the nest just the week before and saw three chicks in the nest. I told Rebecca I been photographing them almost every day and it had been over three weeks since I had seen three chicks.

Debbie and I looked twice up and down the stream for a third chick but it was nowhere to be found. While we were looking for the third chick I found the nest downstream caught in a log jam.



We called Rebecca and Dave to inform them the adults were still working the area. They brilliantly put into motion a plan to build a platform and make a new nest. We constructed the nest about fifty feet from the original tree. The nest was about eight feet off the ground; just high enough so the eaglets would be safe from ground predators.

Wildlife Specialist, Tom Carr and his wife Krista, were on hand to help construct the platform and weave a new nest of sticks and straw.

Dave called Betty Ross at Glen Helen Raptor Center who drove the eaglets back to Brookville Lake. We placed them in their new nest along with some fresh Salmon.

Before we were finished, the adults were circling overhead with fish ready to feed their babies. We were pretty certain the adults would not abandon the chicks but we were concerned they might not accept the platform.



Deb and I gave them a visit the next day and the eaglets were sitting up tall and looking great. Mama and papa were sitting in their favorite places and it was business as usual.

We were still being told by John Castrale that he had seen three chicks in the nest the week before by helicopter. Deb and I again walked up and down stream looking for a third baby but found nothing.





I met Dave and Jill at the nest on Tuesday. Dave used a telescopic pole with a mirror on one end to look into the nest to see if the adults had been bringing food. As we were standing in the creek to get a good look at the nest, I spotted something moving along shore downstream. I looked through binoculars and Dave looked through my camera only to see a raccoon walking across the creek. Dave noticed he was carrying a half eaten fish. I thought to myself that there are not any fish that big in this creek.



Dave left for town to get more fish at the market. I waited at the nest site for him to return. After about 45 minutes I began photographing the adult male who had landed in a nearby tree. Suddenly, I started to hear one of the babies cry. It sounded like it was coming from downstream. I started watching the two in the nest with binoculars to see if it was one of them crying. About 10 minutes later I heard the cry again and concluded it was coming from downstream. The far side of the creek was a steep wooded bank. We were only able to search this bank by looking

with binoculars. I crossed the creek and started searching along the opposite bank while walking in the water. I had walked about 75 feet downstream, from the newly constructed nest, when I saw the third chick hunkered down behind a large fallen log in thick high weeds.



I called Rebecca, who canceled her dinner plans. I then called Debbie, who closed our studio and rushed to the nest site and I called Dave who had just left the market. Dave said he had purchased two pounds of fish. I asked if he had enough for three, that I had just found the third baby. Needless to say we had another rescue.



Dave placed the eagle in the nest. Nothing was broken and he was certainly glad to be back with his family after six days on the ground. It must have been quite a scene that night when the nest came crashing down. Of course we had to have another photo opt.

After we placed the third chick in the nest we each climbed the ladder to have a closer look. As Debbie looked in the nest, the one we had just found gave her a little grunt. This is the same sound the adult male makes. We then knew it was a little boy and the other two were little girls.

Dave later put the pieces together and figured out that's where the raccoon had gotten the half eaten fish. The adult eagles had been feeding the chick on the ground and the raccoon took the leftovers scraps from the eaglet.



As I look back now, I think two chicks were large enough and strong enough to look out over the nest for several weeks. The smallest eagle was always laying down out of sight; thus, making me think only two had survived.

I went to the nest the next day only to see two chicks. I began searching all around on the floor of the woods thinking one had jumped out of the nest. I called Debbie and Rebecca to tell them one chick was missing. I looked for over an hour when all the sudden the missing chick raised her head up out of the nest. She had been snuggled down in the nest completely out of sight.

I checked on the eaglets daily for the next two months. One Saturday and Sunday it rained for two days straight. It stopped raining for a couple of hours Sunday morning so I decided to check on them. As soon as I hiked into the woods it began to pour down rain. I covered my camera and tripod with a large trash bag and photographed the triplets in the rain. They looked like soaked little puppies.



The female adult was extremely difficult to photograph. She always remained hidden behind branches and leaves. She would always leave as soon as I made eye contact. During the brooding season, the male was somewhat easier to get close to; often times posing in the open for hours. The adults would never go to the nest as long as they knew I was in the area.

One day I hid in the woods under a camouflage net hoping to get a picture of one of the adults delivering food. After about four hours and forty mosquito bites the mama came in with a large fish. She did not fly directly into the nest. She landed just short of the nest on a branch where she was concealed by leaves. I took one picture of her. She heard the camera, dropped the fish and flew away. She is very skittish and does not like company.

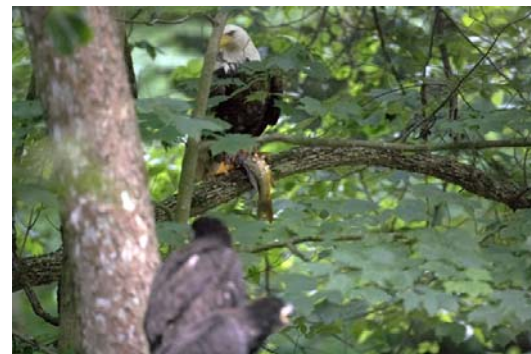
We had nailed a branch to the nest tree so the eaglets would have a perch to sit on while learning to fly. They would practice daily, fly from one side of the nest to the other, exercising their muscles and practicing their take offs and landings

We decided the third eaglet we found on the ground must have been the oldest and strongest. He may have ridden the nest as it washed downstream but I actually think he flew, gliding to the ground.



The three eaglets are very affectionate toward one another, even waiting their turn patiently to eat. The two youngest eaglets always seem to look to the oldest for guidance. Even after the oldest began to fly he would return to the nest to sit with his siblings. I noticed he would always return to the nest when a storm was approaching.

The oldest eaglet began to fly Saturday, June 17. Debbie and I went to the nest that Saturday only to find two babies. I, of course, figured one was lying down in the nest. We were at the nest site all afternoon and didn't see the third chick. I was photographing the adult male when he unexpectedly sprang off his perch only to watch him meet up with the first fledging in flight.



On Monday when I arrived at the nest the first fledgling flew straight at me, landing about twenty-five feet away. I began taking pictures frantically not knowing how much time I had to be that close. After I had taken about seventy-five images I decided to try to get a different angle. Not knowing how much movement he would tolerate, I moved very slowly. I walked all around the baby taking pictures from every possible angle. These eaglets were used to seeing me from the time they were born. They were not intimidated by my presence at all. I took all the pictures I wanted and decided it was time to leave. He was still sitting on the same branch as I walked away.



The second eaglet fledged the nest July 6. I found her perched downstream just above the fallen nest that was still trapped in a log jam. I was able to get so close for pictures I actually had to back up to get her completely in the frame. She was so cooperative that day I took over 600 pictures. Again, she was still on the same perch when I decided it was time to leave. I was able to go daily and photograph all three chicks and get surprisingly close each time.

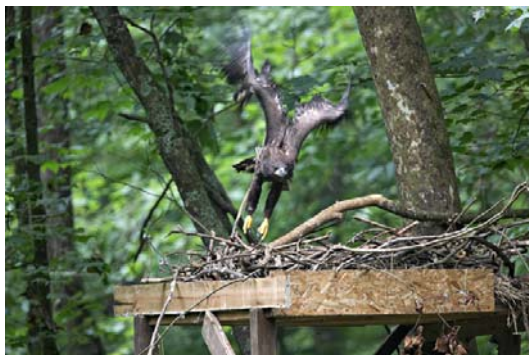


It was not until July 14 that the third chick began to fly. I arrived at the nest around 2:30 that day. One of the eaglets was sitting on a log close to the ground just across the stream from the nest. I took several pictures of her.

I then decided to take some pictures of the last chick in the nest. I noticed she was flying back and forth across the nest. I pointed the camera at her when all of the sudden she lifted her wings high over her head and flew up out of the nest straight at me. She flew so close over my head I could have touched her as she passed. I was lucky enough to photograph her first solo flight. Debbie thinks she deliberately waited for me to arrive to see her first flight. Deb says I was so patient with the eaglet when she couldn't fly.

When the babies first began to fly they took very short trips. They only flew about a quarter of a mile at a time. They did not have much stamina. They would then sit and rest for hours. Just like the adults, they soon found their favorite perches and became very predictable. They were also very clumsy and made many crash landings.

The next day, after the third baby had begun to fly, I found her sitting on a log on the ground by the creek. She sat there all afternoon and I could tell she had an injured foot. I think she must have injured it while landing. She was not putting any weight on this foot and was hopping on one foot from one side of the log to the other. Toward evening, after placing her weight on her good foot all day, she flew to the ground and settled down in the weeds. She must have been trying to rest her good leg because she was unable to shift her weight from side to side.



It was a Friday afternoon when I observed this behavior. I was not able to return to the nest until Monday. I found the injured eaglet sitting on the same log. She was still favoring her injured foot. Again, she went to the ground to rest after several hours.

I decided to call Dave and Rebecca. Dave called John Castrale to inform him we had an injured eaglet. Castrale said to bring the eagle in if we could catch her.

We sat up a bird net made for small birds. We were hoping the eaglet would fly into it and get tangled up enough for us to catch her. She flew right through the net ripping a hole in it and never looked back.

For the next three weeks the injured eagle stayed close to the nest area still favoring her injured foot. On August 5 she had enough stamina to fly to the lake to meet up with her siblings. It was great to see all three eaglets playing together and doing aerobatics.



Deb and I started finding the eagles by boat the middle of August. We first found all three babies in the same tree the adults used to feed last year's babies.

Surprisingly enough, on August 20, we counted four immatures flying and playing together. They had united with at least one of the 2005 siblings. We had not yet seen all five eaglets together. I was able to capture several images of these beautiful majestic animals as they posed for me in flight.

On December 29, we discovered a new nest being constructed in the same tree the nest had fallen. I checked the progress of the construction in January, February and March. It appeared as though they had begun construction but then abandoned the site.

The second week of March we found both adults working on the original 2005 nest. On April 7, over a month late, I found the adults incubating eggs.

I soon discovered that one of the adults was a different eagle. It was a young adult with white underneath and brown still remaining in the head and tail. It is a well known fact that bald eagles mate for life once paired. If one of the pair should perish the survivor will not hesitate to accept a new mate.

I reported my findings to John Castrale who flew over the nest the next day and confirmed my findings. One eagle was a young adult male and incubation had begun.

I would like to personally thank Rebecca Fallat for allowing me this opportunity of a lifetime. Her talents as a Naturalist and an Artist have touched me. Also, a special thanks to Dave and Jill Russell. Their knowledge and experience handling the eaglets is second to none. I would also like to thank my lovely wife Debbie for sharing this experience with me. She alone understands my passion for photography and what it has meant for me to capture images of these magnificent, spiritual, Messengers to the Creator.

