



Audubon | FLORIDA

EagleWatch

Annual Report 2019 - 2020

Photo: Alan Ross

Behind the Binoculars:

NOTES FROM THE EAGLEWATCH PROGRAM MANAGER

“These are unprecedented times” has become the slogan for 2020. The year’s shifts have been both deep and broad, encompassing personal, social, economic, and even conservation issues. Monitoring programs, including EagleWatch, pivoted to find creative ways to gather critical data during the pandemic while prioritizing the safety of volunteers and staff.

At Audubon, the safety of our staff and volunteers remains paramount. We supported both as the EagleWatch program adapted to the pandemic.

We do estimate that our ability to monitor roughly 20% of our nests was impacted by the shelter-at-home mandate and the closure of public areas, and unfortunately we lost key data for many nests or were forced to make educated assumptions for other nests with reduced datasets.

Despite these limitations, the Audubon EagleWatch Program finished strong in May with another year of growth. Nest monitoring coverage expanded into five new counties (Glades, Jackson, Levy, Suwanee, and Walton) and more than doubled in eight of the counties where EagleWatch focused on expanding efforts.

EagleWatch now monitors nests in 65% of Florida’s counties. The number of nests monitored by EagleWatch grew 15%, from 740 nests last year to 852 nests this season.



I am so proud of all that our volunteers accomplished this season, and I hope the following stories inspire you as you read about what a passionate, committed group of people can do to help wildlife and wild places.

Thank you,

Shawnlei Breeding, *EagleWatch Program Manager*
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In This Issue

Shifts at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Forge New Opportunities for EagleWatch

page 3

Volunteers are the Heartbeat of EagleWatch

page 3

Auxiliary Banding Study Continues

page 4

2019-2020 BREEDING SEASON BY THE NUMBERS



1.24

**EAGLE FLEDGLINGS
PER OCCUPIED NEST**



852

**NESTS MONITORED IN 46
COUNTIES IN 2019-2020**



90%

**806 OF 898
NESTLINGS FLEDGED**



48*

**JUVENILE EAGLES BANDED AND RELEASED
SINCE THE START OF THE STUDY**

*8 JUVENILE EAGLES BANDED AND RELEASED IN 2020

Shifts at the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission Forge New Opportunities for EagleWatch

Last fall, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) met with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the EagleWatch Program Manager Shawnlei Breeding to discuss upcoming changes to FWC's Eagle Nest Locator and nest ID assignment services associated with changes to the eagle nest monitoring strategies for Florida.

The nesting Bald Eagle population in Florida is doing well and has met or exceeded statewide conservation goals for the last 20 years. As a result of exceeding the recovery goal and with the permitting responsibilities shifting back to the USFWS, FWC will be reducing their involvement with eagle monitoring in Florida. The FWC will be using EagleWatch and other partner collected data to inform the development of a long-term monitoring strategy for eagles. The FWC Eagle Nest Locator will be transitioned to a static map displaying historical data from FWC aerial surveys from 1998-2017.

EagleWatch will step into the role of providing nest information to stakeholders and will continue to maintain and update the nest map while assigning nest ID's for new nests reported to EagleWatch and the FWC. FWC staff members have expressed their support for EagleWatch as we assume these functions for our program purposes and will promote the program to their other partners in need of these services.

EagleWatch will now be the only consistent, widespread nest monitoring effort in Florida, and as such plays an important role in protecting nests by documenting new or relocated nest locations each season. Importantly, long-term data on eagles will help us understand the ongoing impact of climate change on this iconic species. EagleWatch will continue to work at the intersection of these issues.

An eagle makes a nest in a cell tower. As more eagles make nests on man-made structures, EagleWatch is studying how those eaglets differ from those raised within nests on natural structures. Photo: Bob Glover.



An adult eagle sits with an eaglet. Thanks to volunteers, the EagleWatch program recorded 14,900 nest observations. Photo: Jack Horton.

Volunteers are the Heartbeat of EagleWatch

Audubon founded large-scale community science events more than 100 years ago with the first Audubon Christmas Bird Count. Conservation is too large of a task to be accomplished by a few biologists or conservation organization staff; success takes all of us working together to collect the data to inform effective conservation management decisions.

The dedicated Audubon EagleWatch volunteers are the heartbeat and lifeblood of our program, monitoring roughly half of the active nests in the state. This season, 480 community volunteers donated 7,530 volunteer hours for nest monitoring, data reporting, and in some instances, the rescue and transport of Bald Eagles in need of medical attention. Volunteers submitted more than 14,900 nest observations, despite broad shelter-in-place mandates to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Volunteers also play a key role in protecting nests and reported 90 potential nest disturbance violations this season due to development, recreational activity, and other human encroachment issues.

Audubon EagleWatch volunteers and Bald Eagle protection are supported by Duke Energy Foundation's Powerful Communities: Nature grants for the second year!

“Thank you for running the EagleWatch program. Before joining as a volunteer, I monitored the two nests that I still watch, but the data languished in my notebooks. I love watching the eagles return, lay their eggs, and raise their young. To see the eaglets grow, vigorously flap their wings, and finally take to the sky is a joy. That there is a place to record these observations enhances the experience. And, best of all is knowing that you and others are using my data for the betterment of these magnificent birds.”

– Duffy Kopriva

Auxiliary Banding Study Continues

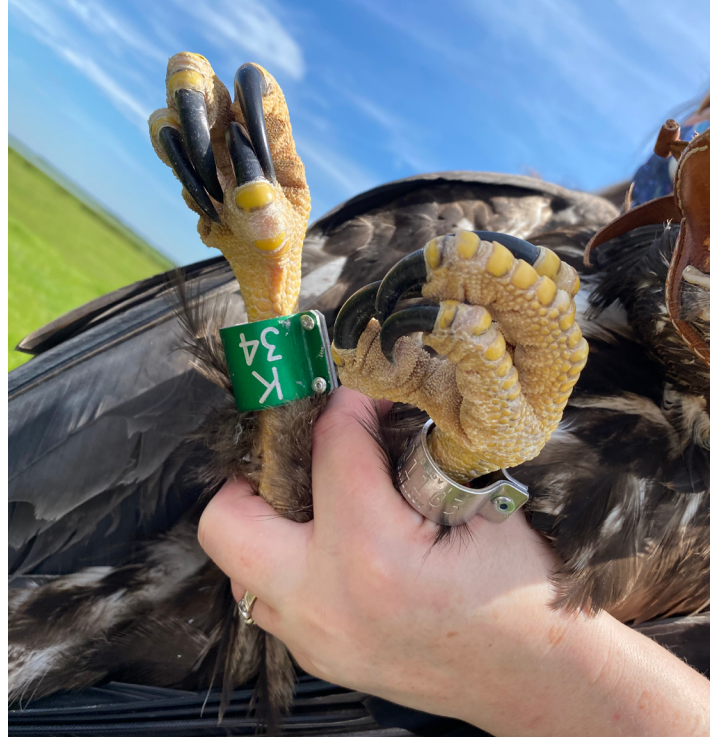
Approximately 20% of the nests monitored by EagleWatch occur on man-made structures, such as cell towers or power line transmission towers. EagleWatch seeks to understand how nest substrate may impact nesting success and nest site choice through analysis of monitoring data and the Auxiliary Banding Study.

The Auxiliary Banding Study seeks to determine if the type of nest in which an eaglet hatches influences future nest choice. If yes, Florida has the potential to see an exponential increase in eagles nesting on these types of structures over time. Agencies and stakeholder organizations should work together to implement management strategies that help Bald Eagles nest more successfully on these structures.

Through a partnership with the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey, The Raptor Trauma Clinic outfits all juvenile eagles they treat with an easy-to-read, unique alphanumeric code before release. The color of the band is related to the type of nest the chick came from: green bands for chicks from natural nests and black bands for chicks from nests on artificial structures.

This season, staff banded and released eight eaglets from five counties. Six of the fledgling eagles came from natural nests and two came from nests on artificial structures. Since inception in 2017, the study has banded and released 48 juvenile eagles.

In March 2020, a park biologist at Honeymoon Island in Dunedin, FL sent a photograph to EagleWatch of a juvenile Bald Eagle with one of our black auxiliary bands,

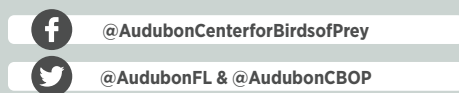


The band on this eagle's foot identifies the bird as the K34 Steinhatchee Eaglet (green band=natural nest). Since inception in 2017, the Auxiliary Banding Study has banded and released 48 juvenile eagles.

04/A, that was perched near an inactive nest. This female was originally rescued from the base of her cell tower nest in Manatee County with a broken leg in 2017 and was released later that year after a lengthy recovery. We were thrilled to see her again and know that she had survived three years in the wild! Another juvenile eagle that was released in Kenansville, FL in March 2020 was reported by a park biologist at Cape Hatteras National Seashore in North Carolina 20 days later. Two additional fledglings released in April 2020 were spotted around their release locations over the following weeks.



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