

Subject: PABIODIV: WTO: Famous residents making dramatic comeback on ANF
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Friends of Allegheny Wilderness has proposed permanent wilderness protection for areas of the Allegheny National Forest that have high potential as Bald Eagle habitat. This includes our proposed wilderness areas at Allegheny Front, Clarion River, Cornplanter, Morrison Run and Tracy Ridge. To see maps of these proposed wilderness areas, go to: http://www.pawild.org/exec_summary.html

Warren Times Observer, Monday, January 24, 2005
Famous residents making dramatic comeback on ANF
By MATT EWALT, Times Observer Staff Writer

Amid all the political battles over the Allegheny National Forest (ANF), despite all the feuds between loggers and environmentalists, a group of the forest's most famous residents has been making a dramatic comeback.

Once on the brink of extinction, the American bald eagle population has made a remarkable recovery over the past half century, thanks to several protective measures put in place by the federal government. And the numbers continue to grow.

Nowhere is this recovery more evident than in northeastern forests, including the ANF. Presently, 28 active bald eagle nests have been found in northwestern Pennsylvania, including five active nests within the ANF. This past spring, a new nest was found along the Allegheny Reservoir, located near the Kiasutha Campground. Prior to Aug. 9, 2004, six nests had been located, but officials believe the nest tree in Complanter collapsed sometime during July.

Since 1992, when the first nest was found in the forest, a total of 44 eagles have matured and left those six nests, according to ANF research.

Of the five remaining nests, three are located on side hills above the Allegheny Reservoir, while two nests are on privately owned islands on the Allegheny River.

"We have a lot of really high-quality habitat here," explained Brad Nelson, wildlife biologist for the Allegheny National Forest (ANF). "The forests have matured, we have big trees for nests." According to Nelson, the Allegheny Reservoir also provides an abundance of fish and a fairly undeveloped shoreline, which is "ideal for eagles."

A typical nest may include a pair of adult eagles raising a clutch of between one and three young. These breeding pairs are known to stay together for life or until one of them dies. The nests range in size, but can be up to eight feet in diameter, Nelson said.

According to statistics provided by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) on the organization's website, fewer than 450 nesting pairs existed in the contiguous United States during the 1950s and 60s. During that time, the use of the pesticide DDT prevented predatory birds like the bald eagle from releasing calcium into egg shells, causing the egg shells to break during incubation.

Since that time, a series of measures taken to protect the species have led to a dramatic recovery for the bald eagle. In 1973, with the passage of the Endangered Species Act, the bald eagle was classified as 'endangered' in most of the contiguous states, providing protection for their wintering and breeding habitats.

By 1999, approximately 5,800 nesting pairs of bald eagles were reported in the lower 48 states, nearly 13 times the number found in the 50s and 60s, according to the NWF.

Northwestern Pennsylvania, including the ANF, is part of the Northern States region, one of five recovery regions designated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). In 1994, the USFWS reported 1,772 known occupied breeding areas distributed over 21 states, far more than the set goal of 1,200 areas over a minimum of 16 states.

The recovery has been so incredible, in fact, that the bald eagle's status on the federal list was changed in 1995 from 'endangered' to 'threatened' throughout the lower 48 states. A proposal to remove the species from the list entirely was made by the USFWS in 1999, but the proposal is still pending.

Even if the bald eagle is delisted, the species would continue to be protected by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and the Lacey Act, according to information provided on the USFWS website.

"We would continue, even if it was taken off the list, to protect the eagle and make sure we maintain viable populations of all our wildlife," insisted Nelson.

In conjunction with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, wildlife biologists at the ANF conduct searches of the forest in the early spring to check on known bald eagle nests and to locate new ones.

"We like to monitor our known nests from a distance, to see if the adults are still tending the nests and to make sure no one is disturbing them," he said. "The eagles start nesting here in February, searching out territory. We usually get out in March, before the leaves come out in the spring."

Nelson also said that an additional group of biologists is hired for the summer to work alongside the full-time biologists to survey different species of wildlife.

"There are a lot of active birders in the area as well," explained Nelson. "Often times they're the ones who find them and tell us about them."

According to Nelson, there are a variety of activities that have the potential to disturb eagle nests, but that "the eagles have gotten fairly tolerant of people in most cases. At the same time, people are more aware that the eagles need to be left alone," he said.

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