

So, What's Up With All The Eagles in The White Mountains Lately?

That is a question probably asked many times a day every winter about this time. Anybody taking a hike around Woodland Lake or stopping by the boat landing at Rainbow Lake will tell you it looks like an eagle invasion some days with more than a dozen eagles perched or flying nearby. Even driving the highways can reveal eagles nearby, both perched in roadside trees or resting casually on the ground. Ever since they were removed from the Endangered Species list almost 10 years ago, in June of 2007, their numbers seem to keep increasing. The many summertime residents and visitors only see a few eagles and only near lakes where they have built their nests. So, how come we see more eagles in the winter?

It turns out that the White Mountains witness an interesting switch in populations of very similar bird-predators on fish. During the summer, this area is loaded with nesting osprey, also known to some as fish hawks, with dozens of nests from the Black River up its tributaries, through the Greer Lakes area and all the way along the Mogollon Rim to the west. It's hard to get a line wet without having to compete with Mother Nature's most efficient fisher, especially during the summer months when they are super busy feeding voraciously hungry chicks. In contrast, there are only about a half dozen bald eagle nests on the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forest and adjacent private lands. With all the high-quality habitat on the Fort Apache Indian Reservation, there are undoubtedly at least a few more nests there that are monitored by the White Mountain Apache Tribe's Game and Fish Department but, overall, the summer osprey population outnumbers the eagle population by at least 10 times.

However, during the winter, the osprey and eagle populations flip in numbers and it becomes rare to even catch a glimpse of an osprey. Even though some waters remain open and ice free, the osprey don't like the drops in temperature and head south to the Gulf of California and Mexico. The osprey do what many other birds do and fly long distances, sometimes even east and west, to find warmer areas with more food. Osprey are almost totally dependent on fish so they must have access to open water with healthy fish populations.

Winters in Arizona are no big deal for bald eagles as they are better built to handle cold conditions. They have more feather insulation but they are also more flexible in what they eat, compared to the osprey. Bald eagles not only eat fish but they also prey on ducks and geese as well as scavenging on already dead animals such as road kills or gut piles leftover from hunting seasons. So, when the lakes are frozen over, the osprey have to leave but the eagles can still find enough food. Since eagles like to steal food from smaller raptors, the last remaining osprey high-tail it south to avoid getting picked on as soon as the migrant eagles start overwhelming this area. Bald eagles seen around here now in the winter all have come from up north somewhere, maybe as far as Alaska or the Yukon. Those areas have real winters with fish protected by feet of ice. Other alternate prey, like ducks, have also flown south to find open, unfrozen water. So, the bald eagles must also migrate south from extreme northern areas since they can't hibernate like a bear.

As you may have noticed, not all the bald eagles hanging out in the White Mountains during the winter are the majestic adults with their distinctive white heads and tails. Immature bald eagles look like golden eagles since they can be mostly shades of brown. One sure-fire difference is that bald eagles, no matter what the age, will always have un-feathered "shins," if you can see them, where a golden

eagle will have feathers growing all the way down the leg and almost covering their feet and talons.

Often adult and immature bald eagles perch in the same tree side by side. So, do eagle families migrate together, with the adults teaching the young birds the best routes? Apparently not, at least not in all cases. Young bald eagles that were outfitted with satellite tracking devices did not migrate with their parents and mostly wandered, exploring new areas. Young birds fresh out of the nest will migrate before their parents and, in Arizona, they often travel to the northwest coast of the United States, in Washington and Oregon, where winters are milder. They might remain in these areas year-round before returning to Arizona as an adult, about five years later, to build a nest, sometimes just a few miles from where they were born.

If you see an adult eagle flying with large sticks in its talons, follow the bird to its nest as it makes repairs and gets ready for another nesting season. Adult eagles that grasp each other's talons and free fall from great heights, only to release each other and pull out of the dive before crashing into the ground, are engaged in a courtship display and will have a nest nearby. January and February find resident nesting birds mixed in with the migrant eagles that nest further north. Another interesting fact is that the bald eagles nesting at lower elevations in Arizona tend to start laying eggs much earlier while the bald eagles nesting in the White Mountains are more in synch with eagles across the rest of the country.

Folks can get more information on Arizona eagles and see live birds up close in a classroom and, with a little luck, in the wild by attending a morning watchable wildlife workshop sponsored by Arizona Game and Fish Department at the Pinetop Regional Office on February 4, 2017 from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. The workshop is free and includes a slide show on eagle natural history, identification and management along with a program from Liberty Wildlife with live eagles. The workshop also includes a short field trip to a nearby lake to, hopefully, observe migrant eagles resting and hunting along their journey south. Participants need to supply their own transportation. For information, call (928) 367-4281.

For Valley visitors coming up to ski or to take in some other winter fun, seeing an adult bald eagle with its bleached white head and tail contrasting with the dark brown body feathers is a highlight sure to make someone's Facebook diary. For local residents who have weathered a few White Mountain winters, the influx of migrant eagles during the winter months is just another way to tell time, obviously without a second hand. It's called Mountain Time!