

1975

CHESAPEAKE BAY BALD EAGLE NEST SURVEY, 1975 by Jackson M. Abbott

The 1975 nesting season for the Bald Eagle in the Chesapeake Bay region was a "first" in many ways. We looked at more active eagle nests (75) than in any year since the survey began in 1957. More nests were abandoned (44), more nests hatched young (31) and more young eagles were hatched (46) than in any previous year since 1957. Table I summarizes the survey results by county and state.

Examined by state, the Chesapeake Bay region bald eagle nesting population is booming only in the state of Maryland which has shown a steady increase in nesting pairs and in hatching success (see Table II). In Maryland we looked at 42 active nests of which 24 (57%) hatched 37 eaglets and 18 nests (43%) were abandoned. Of those abandoned, five were partially blown out in the April wind storms, one incubated her eggs for more than six weeks (five weeks is the normal maximum incubation period), and one nest tree was deliberately felled by lumbermen (the USF & W Service is investigating this act for possible prosecution). Of the five nests abandoned because of wind damage, three are normally successful in hatching young.

On the other hand, Virginia's nesting bald eagle population has held steady for 14 years with a hatching success rate of only about 25%, on the average (see Table II). In 1975 we looked at 32 active nests in Virginia of which only seven (22%) hatched young (a total of nine eaglets) while 25 nests (78%) were abandoned. Of those abandoned, two normally successful nests were wind damaged, including the one at the Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge in Fairfax County. Steve Wunderly, working at the refuge during the period of high winds watched the nest tree swaying back and forth violently, constantly hitting a nearby tree and obviously loosening the nest. The adult was still incubating on 4 April, after two days of high winds, but abandoned it on 5 April. One nest not usually successful was blown down and in two other nests, the

adult eagle incubated for more than six weeks in one and for eleven weeks (27 Feb through 21 May) in the other.

One pair of bald eagles tenaciously clings to Delaware (Bombay Hook NW Refuge) and was, as usual, unproductive. The three pairs of bald eagles which formerly nested along Blackbird Creek in New Castle County, Love Creek in Sussex County and Indian River in Sussex County, Delaware, have apparently abandoned these areas.

Very strange goings-on occurred at one Virginia eagle nest near Urbanna on the lower Rappahannock River. On 18 March and 21 March an adult bald eagle was seen in an incubating posture in the nest. On 20 and 26 April Dr. Mitchell Byrd and three other observers saw, from a boat, an osprey in the nest, apparently incubating! On 27 April the writer and Morton Smith (of the US F & W S) clearly saw an adult bald eagle in an incubating posture in the nest, as did Fred Scott when he flew over the nest nearly a month later on 21 May. On 2 June an adult bald eagle was seen standing in the nest by Dr. Mitchell Byrd. This pair of eagles has a history of zero (0) eaglet production per year for each of the ten years we have been observing that pair. It is probable that the eagles had already abandoned the egg/s by the 20th of April when Dr. Byrd first saw an osprey on the nest. The eagles must have returned on the 26th of April, after Dr. Byrd saw an osprey on the nest that day, and chased the ospreys away. Our observation of an adult eagle in an incubating posture in the nest on the very next day (27 April) raises the fascinating question of whose egg/s (if any) were being incubated by the osprey between 20 and 26 April and by the eagle between 27 April and 21 May?

Just before egg-laying time, on 19 Jan 1975, Mrs. J. Plymire found an adult bald eagle shot to death near its nest two miles south of Chestertown,

Kent County, Md. This is the second year in succession that an adult bald eagle has been found dead from gunshot at this particular nest.

Unhappily, many of the farmers of Kent County (and adjoining Cecil County) have a dislike for eagles and have a long documented history of killing eagles, ostensibly because they "kill chickens and lambs". It makes no difference to these people, who pass their hatred for eagles on from one generation to the next, that the bald eagle is protected by law, is our national bird, and that the government will reimburse the owner for any stock proven to have been killed by an eagle. It is remarkable that, despite this constant persecution, there still are two pairs of bald eagles attempting to nest in Kent County and one in Cecil County; this is down from five pairs in Kent and three in Cecil during the early 1960's. Happily, the situation seems to be just the reverse in the counties south of Kent along the Eastern Shore and in most of the Bay region, where people generally protect eagles and their nests and show a keen interest in their preservation.

Nest building by bald eagles in the Bay region is normally done in the fall or early winter. This year a pair of eagles near Mathews in Mathews County, Va, constructed a new nest beginning about 28 April to replace their active nest which was blown down on 26 April during intense winds. The nest appeared to be finished except for lining material on 21 May but the eagles did not complete it. They will undoubtedly use it for egg laying in the 1976 season.

Indicating that some of the breeding eagle population in the Bay region is recovering from its chemical-based malaise of the 1950's and 1960's is that four usually unproductive pairs (one in Virginia, three in Maryland) hatched young in 1975 for the first time since their nests have been observed

annually. An additional 25 usually unproductive pairs (16 in Va., eight in Md., one in Del.) continued to be unproductive in 1975.

In addition to the 75 active bald eagle nests seen in 1975, there were five pairs of adults seen during the nesting season in locations where one or more old nests exist but, since none were active, these pairs apparently did not lay eggs this season.

A picture of where in the Bay region the nesting bald eagle population is doing well and where not so well in 1975 may be gleaned from Table I. Table II compares this data with results from other years.

As coordinator for this survey, which is sponsored by ANS and actively supported with aircraft and pilots (Morton Smith and Ed Ferguson) by the US F & W S, the writer wishes to express sincere appreciation to these organizations and individuals for their support in 1975 and to the following persons for their reports and observations: Dr. Mitchell Byrd, Frederick R. Scott, L. K. Malone, Jack Sheridan, Mrs. J. Plymire, Steven Wunderly, Maryland Department of Natural Resources personnel Vernon Stott and Bernard Halla, US F & W personnel Bill Julian, Guy Willey, Richard Antonette, Donald Gregory and Nelson Swink and Virginia Forester Richard Rapp.

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Chesapeake Bay Region Bald Eagle Survey

Table II. Comparative Bald Eagle Nest Data, Chesapeake Bay Region,
for Selected Years

	1936	1962	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975
<u>No. Active Nests Found:</u>									
Pennsylvania	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Delaware	4	0	1	2	1	2	1	1	1
Maryland	30	14	19	26	27	27	33	30	42
Virginia	17	30	31	30	32	29	32	26	32
Total	52	44	51	58	60	58	66	57	75
<u>No. Active Nests Rechecked:</u>									
Pennsylvania	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Delaware	4	-	1	1	1	2	1	1	1
Maryland	16	11	19	24	24	18	33	30	42
Virginia	15	19	30	27	31	27	32	26	32
Total	36	30	50	52	56	47	66	57	75
<u>Rechecked Active Nests Abandoned:</u>									
Pennsylvania	0	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Delaware	0	-	1	-	1	2	1	1	1
Maryland	2	10	8	14	10	10	18	9	18
Virginia	0	15	22	21	25	20	23	18	25
Total	2	25	31	35	36	32	42	28	44
<u>Rechecked Active Nests Hatching Young:</u>									
Pennsylvania	1	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Delaware	4	-	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Maryland	14	1	11	10	14	8	15	21	24
Virginia	15	4	8	6	6	7	9	8	7
Total	34	5	19	17	20	15	24	29	31
<u>No. Young Hatched:</u>									
Pennsylvania	2	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Delaware	8	-	-	1	-	-	-	-	-
Maryland	28	1	17	13	17	10	28	26	37
Virginia	35	6	10	8	8	10	13	14	9
Total	73	7	27	22	25	20	41	40	46
<u>Pairs of Adults Present but no Active Nest Found:</u>									
Delaware	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Maryland	8	11	2	6	0	0	4	0	2
Virginia	1	10	1	1	0	0	6	0	3
Total	9	23	3	7	0	0	11	0	5

Table I. Bald Eagle nest data, Chesapeake Bay Region, 1975

STATE & COUNTY	No. of Active Nests -			No. Young Hatched	Pairs of Adults Not Nesting
	Found	Abandoned	Hatching Young		
Del.; Kent Co.	1	1	-	-	-
Md.; Anne Arundel	2	1 (cut down)	1	2	1
Calvert	3	3 (1 to wind)	-	-	-
Cecil	1	1	-	-	-
Charles	5	3 (1 to wind)	2	3	-
Dorchester	13	5 (2 to wind)	8	13	-
Kent	1	1 (wind)	-	-	1 (ad. shot)
Queen Anne's	4	2	2	3	-
St. Mary's	6	-	6	9	-
Somerset	1	1	-	-	-
Talbot	3	-	3	5	-
Wicomico	1	1	-	-	-
Worcester	2	-	2	2	-
Va.; Accomac	1	-	1	1	-
Essex	1	1 (wind)	-	-	-
Fairfax	1	1 (wind)	-	-	-
Gloucester	1	1	-	-	-
James City	-	-	-	-	1
King George	4	4	-	-	1
King William	3	3	-	-	-
Lancaster	2	1	1	2	-
Mathews	1	1 (wind)	-	-	-
Middlesex	1	1	-	-	-
New Kent	3	3	-	-	-
Northumberland	2	1	1	1	-
Richmond	3	1	2	2	-
Stafford	2	2	-	-	1
Westmoreland	7	5	2	3	-
TOTALS:	75	44	31	46	5