

What do we really know about 'our' eagles?

By Jeb Barzen, Ferry Bluff Eagle Council

Assessing the impact of any type of development on eagles that winter in the Sauk Prairie area requires an evaluation of eagle habitat needs. Following the Sauk Prairie Comprehensive Plan, FBEC used data it has collected over two decades to assess the impact expected from the development proposed by Mr. Nonn along Water Street in Prairie du Sac. We submitted our evaluation to the Prairie du Sac Plan Commission on June 5, concluding that the proposed development threatens to curtail eagle use of the downtown area. To date, neither the Prairie du Sac Plan Commission nor the Prairie du Sac Village Board has responded directly to the data that FBEC provided. Members of the Sauk Prairie community should be aware of this eagle information so that they can form their own opinions and act accordingly. It is our hope to publish the biological assessment in parts over the next few weeks. The map data presented by Richard Van last week was developed after the FBEC biological assessment was submitted but serves as a good starting point.

The biological assessment was based on two basic kinds of information that FBEC has gathered. To monitor eagle numbers as well as to measure how eagles use our area within and among different winters, FBEC has counted eagles as they have flown into 10-15 communal night roosts located from Prairie du Sac to Lone Rock. These roost surveys have been conducted for 18 years. Second, FBEC captured 17 wild eagles, harnessed them with radio transmitters, and followed these marked birds for three winters to understand eagle habitat use by specific individuals.

Understanding why eagles come to Sauk Prairie (and conversely, what might make eagles leave) is more complicated than it appears at first glance. Eagles in the Sauk Prairie area are strongly influenced by food availability that varies among 3 different geographic scales: 1) Sauk Prairie as compared to other regions of the Upper Midwest, 2) habitats within the greater Sauk Prairie region (Wisconsin Dells to Lone Rock), and 3) within a particular habitat area such as the environs of Eagle Island located in close proximity to the proposed development area. Eagle habitat use is further complicated by changes in food availability over time because ice conditions on the river vary greatly during the winter. Ice has a large impact on the availability of fish, a major food source for eagles wintering along the Wisconsin River. In past years, for example, FBEC has written articles regarding people's concern over the 'disappearance' of our eagles that was explained by normal movements of eagles in response to rapidly changing winter conditions. Over the next few weeks we will look at how eagle habitat use varies over space and time so that our assessment of the proposed Nonn development can be understood in the appropriate context.

Summary of the FBEC biological assessment:

The number of eagles using the Sauk Prairie region during winter varies greatly from one year to the next, implying that habitat quality here or elsewhere varies greatly. The high fidelity of eagles to Sauk Prairie suggests that it is habitat quality located in Sauk Prairie that causes much of this variation. If habitat conditions deteriorate in Sauk Prairie, eagles

will leave. While in the Sauk Prairie region, eagles require forested edges along open (unfrozen) river to perch during the day for foraging, forested bluffs to sleep in at night and agricultural areas to provide alternative foods. These habitats must all be located in close proximity to each other and one location where this occurs is adjacent to the villages of Prairie du Sac and Sauk City. When the river ices up during colder portions of the winter, habitats near Prairie du Sac and Sauk City become even more important as eagles will concentrate in this relatively small area. Eagle use of Eagle Island and the river frontage near the two villages is already affected by human disturbance. Additional human disturbance in this area is likely to significantly diminish these important habitats even further. With less eagle use of the particular area, the quality of the most important area for eagle viewing will be diminished and the current eagle tourism income of \$1.2 million/annum will be jeopardized.

Next week: Is there any evidence of eagle disturbance in Prairie du Sac?