

What do we really know about ‘our’ eagles?

Eagle use of Sauk Prairie

By Jeb Barzen, Ferry Bluff Eagle Council

“I don’t think this development will affect the eagles in Sauk Prairie because I have seen eagles perched along Water Street and they didn’t seem to mind the human traffic”. This conclusion, or others of similar nature, are often heard around town. They are likely based on real observations. Who hasn’t seen an eagle perched on the big cottonwood tree just south of Graff Park on a winter morning with morning traffic buzzing by within 50 feet? It is usually a big female and she often uses the same branch. Though each of us can relate such information, do these single observations help us predict how sensitive eagles are to human disturbance?

Predicting what eagles will do is a complicated business but one way that FBEC addressed this issue was to examine how our 17 radio-tracked eagles used the Sauk Prairie area during the 3 winters during which the eagles were tracked. FBEC members and volunteers located each eagle in the study area once during the day and once during the night. These locations were then plotted and related in the biological assessment provided for the current development proposed by Ken Nonn.

Eagle Distribution

For the immediate area of Prairie du Sac and Sauk City, a confluence of important habitats occurs in close proximity: the undeveloped forested riverbank provides perching opportunities near the river; the forested bluffs provide night roosts located nearby; and the dam provides open water in all but the most severe winters. Agricultural habitat is also nearby. These habitats in close proximity to each other allow eagles to concentrate at the village limits of Sauk Prairie.

Careful examination of eagle use of the environs near the two villages suggest that, though habitat conditions for wintering eagles is very good, human disturbance is already influencing eagle distribution. As you would expect, eagle locations are concentrated near the dam upstream of Prairie du Sac and occur on both sides of the river. In this area the homes are sited well away from the river (Figure 1a), reducing direct human disturbance. Downriver of the Highway 60 Bridge, where the village of Prairie du Sac closely abuts the river on the west bank, there is little eagle use of the west bank. Between extensively developed parts of Prairie du Sac and Sauk City, where more forested areas exist in Derleth Park, eagles again use the west bank. Once the developed section of Sauk City abuts the river, eagle use of the west bank again dissipates until the river flows past the Highway 12 Bridge and homes are again set back from the river. At this point in the river eagle use of both sides of the river again occurs.

In contrast, eagle use near Lone Rock is as intensive as in Sauk Prairie but the pattern of use is very different. The town of Lone Rock is located off the river and eagles use both sides of the river equally during the day (Figure 1b).

These data reflect locations of radio-tracked eagles and are not meant to represent all eagle use. Though eagles do use the west bank of the river in town, none of our

telemetered birds did in three winters. These data do, however, reflect the negative influence that Prairie du Sac and Sauk City are already having on eagles that spend the winter in our community. The occurrences of eagles perching on the town side, like in that big cottonwood downstream of Graff Park, are relatively rare events and do not reflect the majority of areas that eagles currently use. Eagle Island is still used extensively by eagles (Figure 1a) but these data show that good eagle habitat can go unused if development occurs too close to eagle perching areas.

Figure 1a. Locations of 17 eagles from 2001-2004 that were followed through radio telemetry in the immediate area of Prairie du Sac and Sauk City, Wisconsin. Daytime locations are in red while nighttime roost locations are in yellow.

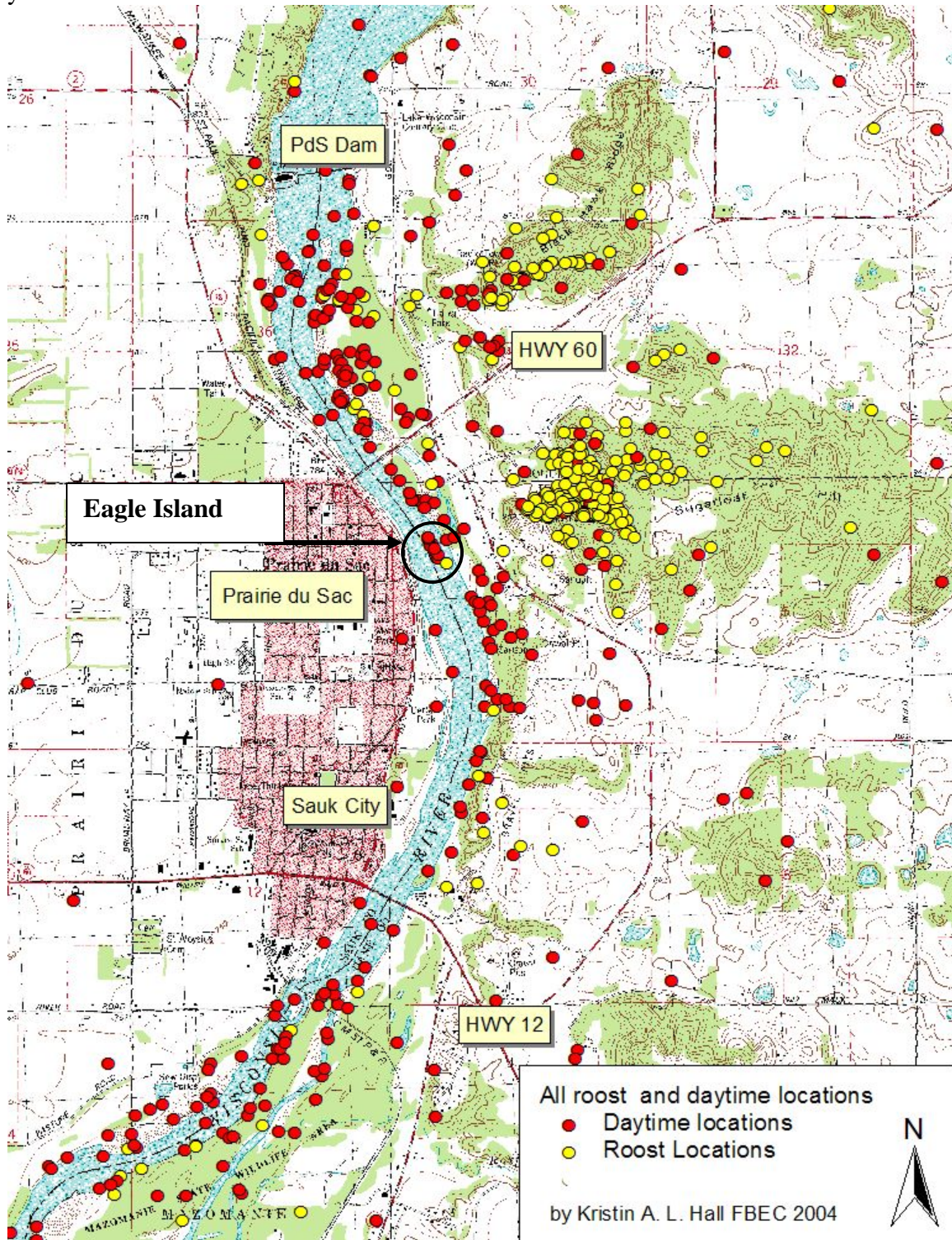


Figure 1b. Locations of 17 eagles from 2001-2004 that were followed through radio telemetry near Lone Rock, Wisconsin. Daytime locations are in yellow while nighttime roost locations are in red (opposite of the depiction in Figure 1a).

