

The Importance of Protecting Ferry Bluff State Natural Area
by Jeb Barzen, Ferry Bluff Eagle Council,
*Working to protect, enhance and maintain Bald Eagle habitat in the Sauk Prairie area
through education, research and management activities.*

It is unusual to have so much snow and cold in November. Regardless of the reason, such vagaries represent an unpredictable environment to which species, such as Bald Eagles, need to adapt if they are to continue gathering here in winter. Environments for Bald Eagles that winter along the Lower Wisconsin River from Sauk Prairie to Lone Rock require several attributes that are not affected by short-term variables, like blustery November weather, and other characteristics that ebb and flow with the fickle weather. The quality of important eagle habitats in winter is also impacted by disturbance from people. Disturbance can occur from well-meaning hikers who illegally enter closed areas, in this case areas that are closed to prevent disturbance to roosting eagles. Understanding a combination of eagle ecology and conservation activities will help us maintain the kind of habitats that allow eagles to concentrate in large numbers along the Lower Wisconsin River during all of the various winter weather patterns that arise.

In winter, Bald Eagles need a good food source which is primarily fish and carrion. Undeveloped shorelines provide important perching areas where eagles can search for food while remaining perched, conserving energy that is otherwise needed to survive cold winters. For night habitats, eagles gather in groups to sleep in trees that are protected from wind. In our area, these roosts are usually located in forested bowls nestled within the bluffs. These convocations of eagles have been as high as 150 individuals in any single night roost. The amount of food, undeveloped shorelines and protected areas at night are not greatly affected by snow and cold but are affected by long-term conservation actions that our community has contributed greatly to. Each winter the availability of these resources to eagles, however, is influenced greatly by two important factors and we can control one of them: weather and human disturbance.

From an eagle's perspective, night roosts need to be located near daytime foraging areas on the river or in the fields to reduce the energetic cost of commuting. Availability of open water or open fields in turn, are affected by ice cover on the river or snow accumulation off the river that hides or obstructs food.

In the Lower Wisconsin River, Bald Eagles solve the problem of ever-changing ice and snow conditions by utilizing up to nine communal night roost locations during winter that are scattered along the river. When ice is largely absent, most eagles use roosts located in bluffs adjacent to the river from Ferry Bluff down to Lone Rock. Conversely, when ice cover is great, eagles concentrate their use of night roosts in bluffs located near the river from Ferry Bluff up to Sauk Prairie because the river typically does not freeze between the dam and Ferry Bluff, even in the coldest of winters. The night roost located at Ferry Bluff State Natural Area (SNA) is thus used by eagles all winter long. It is the hinge in the seesaw of eagle roosting behavior at night and core to supporting our wintering population of eagles.

As critical habitat for wintering eagles of the Lower Wisconsin River, Ferry Bluff SNA is import to conservation activities. Eagles gather in its many bowls each night and fly

upriver, downriver or off-river each morning to forage. Where they go depends upon weather conditions. This rhythm cannot occur if the roosts are unavailable to eagles and human disturbance can act much like ice in preventing eagle use of night roosts.

Matching its importance, Ferry Bluff SNA is the only winter eagle night roost in Wisconsin that receives the full protection of government ownership. A 31-acre parcel was just added to Ferry Bluff SNA to increase the area already under protection. Ferry Bluff SNA is also important to our community for its magnificent vistas, and its high-quality oak forest, savanna and prairie. Managing for eagles, vistas and ecosystem restoration simultaneously requires extra effort by conservationists and extra attention by users.

Eagles are sensitive to disturbance by people during winter and human disturbance is most damaging when eagles are prevented from using their night roosts. To protect eagle night roosting habitat Ferry Bluff SNA is closed to entry November 15 through March 31 each year. The entrance to the trail for hiking up to Cactus Bluff is gated during this period and it is important that people respect this closure. Failure to do so may result in a maximum fine of \$263.50.

In the past two winters, several people have ignored the winter trail closure and walked up to Cactus Bluff. During these events, eagles have been flushed from their roost or have avoided entering the roost. Once disturbed from the roost, eagles have also been reluctant to return immediately after the disturbance abates. While they did clearly know that they were entering a closed area (it is hard to walk around the gate), I suspect that most visitors that enter a closed area have not been aware of their disturbance to eagles because the birds modify their behavior when people are still far away but the damage that illegal entry into a closed area causes is still serious even if unnoticed by the transgressors. I have also heard the excuse that it was okay to ignore the closure signs because eagles were not yet around. Eagles have used Ferry Bluff as early as November, especially in years where winter comes early like this one. It is not easy to predict when eagles will need to use these night roosts and the winter closure of Ferry Bluff is not conditional upon eagle presence.

Ferry Bluff SNA is a magnificent resource opportunity for our community. The ability of this area to provide the eagle habitat, native ecosystems and grand vistas is also a responsibility that we all share. Please join us in respecting the rules that are based on conserving these values and please share this message with others so that visitors from outside our area apply the same land ethic. Sharing this responsibility will help keep eagles returning to our area each winter for decades to come.



Eagles will often perch communally like this in forested bowls of the bluffs at night. These night roosts likely offer protection from the wind and provide for social interaction among the birds. Night roosts in winter can sometimes host as many as 150 eagles. Photo by Ted Thousand.



Winter weather determines how much ice cover occurs and where that ice is located. Eagles need open water or uncovered fields to find their food and eagles prefer to use night roosts that are located as close to their foraging areas as possible. Photo by Ted Thousand.