

December 24, 2021

Hello all you fine roost counters:

On December 19, you collectively counted 194 eagles through 26 hours of volunteer effort (Table 1). That was a bang-up count! We have not collectively counted so many eagles in the Lower Wisconsin since January 12, 2014, when we counted 230 eagles in the same area. That is one month shy of 8 years ago.

Why the increase in wintering eagles and will it continue? Perhaps gizzard shad abundance in the Lower Wisconsin has rebounded finally? I will check into DNR data regarding their fosj survey results and report on that later this winter. Certainly, eagles were distributed relatively equally across the entire stretch of the Lower Wisconsin that we survey. We counted 40 individuals roosting in the two upriver roosts of Black Hawk and Sugar loaf, 63 eagles roosting in the middle reaches of the survey area at Ferry Bluff and Fox Roosts and 86 eagles roosting in Lone Rock at the downriver end of our survey area. This distribution would match a widely distributed food source that is readily available (i.e. no ice cover) throughout the survey area.

Roost conditions also appear to be good. The total of 54 eagles roosting at Ferry Bluff Roost mirrors previous counts when no trespassing occurred within the closed area at Cactus Bluff. That is an accomplishment of DNR ecologists gating the trailhead, DNR conservation officers enforcing the rules and volunteers looking for rule violations. There is more work to be done regarding this issue but it is good to witness some success.

At Sugar Loaf we also observed the most use by eagles seen since February 23, 2014. Pretty much the same time span as observed for total numbers of eagles – just shy of 8 years. The presence of so many eagles suggests that the quality of the roost habitat remains good at Sugar Loaf so other factors may be responsible for low eagle use in the past 8 years. Factors could be roost disturbance by people or perhaps by low number of eagles in the area overall. Higher use of the adjacent Black Hawk Roost over the past 8 years, however, suggests that low population numbers alone would not explain the low use of Sugar Loaf by wintering eagles. Just what the disturbance might be at Sugar Loaf, however, is still unclear. We will continue to explore this hypothesis and see if any mitigation is possible.

Merry Christmas to all of you and thank you for the gifts that you have given so often – gifts of caring and acting on behalf of the natural resources that we all share.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeb Barzen". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Jeb Barzen
President, Ferry Bluff Eagle Council

