

December 20, 2022

Hello all you fine roost counters:

On December 18, you collectively counted 216 eagles through 22 hours of volunteer observance (Table 1). What a fantastic effort and result! Thank you. In comparison to other mid-December counts, this is the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest that volunteers have tabulated since 1988. We counted 314 eagles on December 2, 2007, and 251 eagles on December 15, 2013. Other high-count years for mid-December include December 18, 2005; December 3, 2006; and December 19, 2021 where 198, 198 and 194 eagles, respectively, were counted. For any count during the winter, 216 eagles is the 7<sup>th</sup> highest count found over 34 years of monitoring. For reference, our highest ever winter eagle count in the Lower Wisconsin River area has been 434 eagles (February 3, 2013), more than twice the number of eagles we counted on Sunday.

In past writings, I have often talked about the shifting of eagles between down-river and up-river locations. The hypothesis is that, when ice and snow cover is high downstream, food is primarily available upstream and that is where we find the most eagles. When ice cover is low, food is distributed throughout the river system and eagles utilize the entire river stretch but mostly down-river, away from Sauk Prairie.

Our count this year suggests that a different relationship exists within the Lower Wisconsin that is affecting the distribution of eagles. Last Sunday, high numbers of eagles roosted along the entire stretch of river from Black Hawk Roost (near the dam) to Lone Rock Roost, our roost located farthest downstream (Figure 1). The entire river was still largely open, but snow cover probably precluded feeding on carrion in off-river habitats – thus the low number of eagles counted at Ederer/Been but high eagle numbers at all roosts near the river except for Fox and McDonald Roosts.

A possible explanation of this situation is that this might be a year where gizzard shad populations are high and there is now a die-off, providing a high amount of food for foraging eagles within the entire river corridor, but especially near the dam. In previous years, even with open water from the dam to Lone Rock, most eagles would not use up-river habitats very much. Presumably these were migrant eagles, not individuals with territories located within the Lower Wisconsin River corridor. Local eagles (i.e. those with nesting territories along this stretch of river) might forage in the up-river areas but numbers of these birds would be less than 10 or so. The count from December 4, 2022 (Table 1) shows the typical pattern of a few eagles located up-stream but a majority located from Ferry Bluff to Lone Rock. If a gizzard shad die-off occurred after the December 4 count, dead gizzard shad may have gone through the turbines at the Prairie du Sac dam, providing abundant food along the up-river stretch of river that would attract the larger number of eagles that we counted last Sunday. We also had extensive snow throughout Wisconsin so many more eagles may have been encouraged by the weather to migrate to the Lower Wisconsin River area.

Of course, this is all speculation at this point. To gather more information, I will attempt to find fish survey results from the DNR to understand what is happening to the eagle food base. Another interesting investigation is to ask anyone who looks along the shore of the Wisconsin River in the vicinity of Prairie du Sac and Sauk City to let me know what you find. If the speculation here is correct, there should be abundant evidence of dead gizzard shad along the shores in the upper reaches of the river. Please let me know what you find.

As always, thank you for your interest and for the effort of our many fine counters. Come join us!

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeb Barzen". The letters are cursive and somewhat stylized, with the first name "Jeb" being more prominent than the last name "Barzen".

Jeb Barzen  
President, Ferry Bluff Eagle Council

Table 1. Coordinated roost count results for the winter of 2022/2023 by roost. Column headings are: A=Adult, I=Immature, U=Unknown age and T=Total.

<b>FBEC Roost Count Summary</b>																												
	Dec. 4, 2022				Dec. 18, 2022				Jan. 1, 2023				Jan. 15, 2023				Jan. 29, 2023				Feb. 12, 2023				Feb. 26, 2023			
ROOST	Ad	Im	Unk	Tot	Ad	Im	Unk	Tot	Ad	Im	Unk	Tot	Ad	Im	Unk	Tot	Ad	Im	Unk	Tot	Ad	Im	Unk	Tot				
Blackhawk	1	1	4	6	22	17		39																				
Sugarloaf				0	12	12	1	25																				
Isering																												
Ferry Bluff	5	11		16	24	19	18	61																				
Thunderbird																												
Schroeder																												
Cassell																												
Fox				0	3	3		6																				
McDonald				NC				0																				
Jones Slough																												
Lone Rock	27	9	24	60	43	32	4	79																				
Leland																												
Ederer/Been				NC	3	2	1	6																				
Big Hollow																												
Devil's Lake																												
Baxter's Hollow																												
WI Dells																												
<b>TOTAL</b>	33	21	28	82	107	85	24	216																				
Vol. Hours				22				22																				
Grey Lines are for roosts not counted this year.																												

Figure 1. Locations of communal, night eagle roosts in the Lower Wisconsin Valley 2006 to present. Of these roosts, 5 are currently in use and monitored: Black Hawk, Sugar Loaf, Ferry Bluff, Fox, McDonald, Lone Rock and Ederer/Been.

### Eagle Roosts in Study Area

