

EAGLES BOUNCE BACK

GO TO A FOOTHILLS LAKE, AND YOU'RE LIKELY TO SEE AN ABUNDANCE OF THE BIRD AMERICA CALLS A NATIONAL SYMBOL



An adult bald eagle perches near the Camp Nine arm of New Melones Lake. Bald eagles in recent years have become a common sight during the winter months at lakes in the Mother Lode. Photo courtesy of Pat Sanders



The bald eagle, a symbol of the United States, landed on the endangered species list 40 years ago. The bird has made a comeback since, helped by a federal ban on most uses of DDT; at this time of year, eagles are legion in the Sierra foothills. "Three of us were up on Camp Nine Road all the way to the end, and along the last part of the road we saw at least 30 bald eagles," said John Turner, a member of the Central Sierra Audubon Society.

By ***Dana M. Nichols***

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Record Staff Writer

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SAN ANDREAS - America's national bird - the bald eagle - is also one of the nation's greatest environmental success stories. And it is easy to see that success this time of year along the rocky shores of major lakes in the foothills.

"Three of us were up on Camp Nine Road all the way to the end, and along the last part of the road we saw at least 30 bald eagles," said John Turner, a member of the Central Sierra Audubon Society.

Camp Nine Road follows the easternmost arm of New Melones Lake, a large reservoir near Angels Camp.

To see eagles soar

- At Camanche and Pardee reservoirs, East Bay Municipal Utility District will offer free boat-based tours from 9 a.m. to noon and from 1 to 4 p.m. on Saturday and Jan. 26. Only a limited number of seats are available. Reserve a seat by calling (209) 772-8204.
- At New Melones Lake, volunteers can assist the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and the Central Sierra Audubon Society with their count of bald eagles and other birds at the lake on Saturday. To get involved, call (209) 536-9094.

Contrast that to the early 1970s, when biologists counted only 30 breeding pairs of bald eagles in all of California, according to the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Despite their 8-foot wing spans, hooked beaks and hunting instincts, the eagles went to the brink of extinction in the decades after World War II. Scientists determined that poisoning by DDT, a pesticide, had caused an often-fatal thinning of the shells of eagle eggs.

Then the U.S. government declared bald eagles an endangered species. In 1972, the Federal government banned most uses of DDT.

Bald eagle populations rebounded. On Aug. 8, 2007, federal game officials removed the bald eagle from the endangered species list, although a number of laws still protect the bird in California.

Now, bald eagles are a common sight in the winter at major lakes in the region including Camanche, Pardee and New Hogan near Valley Springs, and New Melones near Angels Camp.

"Last week I saw a juvenile bald eagle between Acorn Campground and Oak Knoll Campground diving on mud hens," said Adam Durando, park manager for the Army Corps of Engineers-run facilities at New Hogan Lake.

Mud hens, also known as coots, are a common water fowl at the lake.

Bird watchers say that immature bald eagles are both slightly smaller than adults and lack the white head feathers adults have.

During the summer, California bald eagles typically migrate north to the Pacific Northwest, Canada or even Alaska.

Once hunting grounds in the far north ice over, they return to California's milder climate to build nests, mate and lay eggs.

Eagles without any young to raise may head back north as soon as February. Those who hatch chicks will stay until the young can fly on their own sometime over the summer.

Once mated pairs have eggs or chicks, biologists recommend that humans stay at least a few hundred feet away. Sometimes, they say, eagles feeling the pressure of too much noise will abandon a nest, leaving the young to starve.

Fortunately, the birds are so large it is easy to see them from a distance. Also, in coming weeks there are several organized opportunities to see bald eagles.

On Saturday and Jan. 26, East Bay Municipal Utility District will offer free boat-based eagle tours at Camanche and Pardee reservoirs. And the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation, which operates New Melones, on Saturday will team up with Audubon Society volunteers to count the eagle population at that lake.

Folks with binoculars who want to drive to an eagle-viewing spot could try the observation area on Hogan Dam Road next to the visitor center at New Hogan Lake, Durando said.

Contact reporter Dana M. Nichols at (209) 607-1361 or dnichols@recordnet.com. Visit his blog at recordnet.com/calaverasblog.

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