



MONTEREY NEWS

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The Not-So-Regal Bald Eagle

The largest predatory “master of the sky” over Buzzards Bay, as well as the national emblem of America, has returned to being frequently seen along our southern New England coastline. However, according to Benjamin Franklin, it is not at all regal because of perceived character flaws and bad habits. Franklin said it never deserved to be chosen to represent our nation. It frequently feeds on rotten carrion that washes up on the tidal beach, and is proved to be a coward by being driven from its regal perch by the much smaller kingbird. The eagle also steals fish from ospreys, as illustrated in my drawing showing its nesting tower behind our house on Little Bay in Fairhaven. They also harass and steal from smaller birds.

The eagle has dramatically increased in numbers for bird watchers to tally along our shores since the federal government banned the use of the pesticide DDT for mosquitos in 1963. This was in response to Rachael Carson’s best selling book, *Silent Spring*, published the year before. Carson found and documented how the pesticide entered into the food chain, which caused havoc in bird reproduction.

In 1972 the use of shotgun shells with lead shot for hunting waterfowl was banned for a similar reason. The lead shot was being picked up by ducks and other waterfowl, entering the food chain and affecting their predators. Toxins concentrate as they travel up the food chain. If later swallowed into the gullet of an eagle at the top of the food chain, the lead becomes deadly poisonous. Otherwise eagles can live to as old as fifty years in captivity, and the oldest wild eagle tagged was at least thirtyeight years of age. They also have the record of building the biggest nest of any bird, some as tall as



three stories. Young birds growing up develop a nesting site fidelity, but other birds, like ospreys, sometimes tear much of the eagles’ nests apart in autumn to discourage the eagles to leave home.

Recent years have brought seasonal disruptions and the impacts of global warming resulting from climate change, which challenges migrating eagles. Eagle populations have been shifting northward from a number of southern state regions towards more comfortable habitats in the northern states. Audubon science laboratories have used the changing eagle habitat data to get a clear picture of this trend. This is a long way from James Audubon himself, who shot at least eight eagles to mount and paint in his studio.

Bald eagles have faced numerous global, human-caused challenges since the beginning of the twentieth century. During this same period, humans have sought to improve our ecological understanding of the “not so regal bald eagle.” Neither their behaviors nor ours have been perfect. — George B. Emmons