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Hanging With Eagles: Our National Mascot Makes a Soaring Comeback

The American bald eagle has made a spectacular return in the Mississippi Valley

posted by **John Stark**, July 3, 2012 [More by this author](#)



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Courtesy of The National Eagle Center

I was walking my dog around a frozen lake in Minneapolis last January when I noticed a group of people staring up at a tree. I stopped to look, and there was a bald eagle perched on a limb, just yards away.

She (I've since come to know the difference between sexes) was staring intently out at the lake, where a variety of birds were resting on the ice. As she debated her menu choices for the evening — duck, pigeon, pelican or cormorant — I began taking photos with my phone and sending them to friends on the East and West coasts. I had

never seen a bald eagle in person, let alone this close, even though it is our national bird. But since moving to the Twin Cities a year and a half ago, I've seen many.

When my friend Kathy, who lives in San Francisco, came to visit last summer, we decided to take a drive along the Mississippi River on the eastern, Wisconsin side, heading south. We passed a particularly high bluff called Maiden's Rock, one of the many cliffs in America where a mythical Indian maiden and a brave supposedly leaped to their deaths in a suicide love pact.

At the base of the cliff, on a ledge overlooking the Mississippi, is an observation area. We pulled off, and got out of the car. An eagle, riding the warm, afternoon thermals, came soaring down from the top of the cliff. With its wings fully outstretched, it went directly above our heads before gliding out over the river.

Show over, or so we thought.

As we were about to get back into the car, dozens of white birds — pelicans I later learned — suddenly appeared in front of the cliff. For a half-hour or so, they too rode the thermals, performing an aerial ballet worthy of *Cirque du Soleil*. When their show was over, they flew off, as if to go to their dressing rooms.

Little did Kathy and I know that this was merely the warm-up act. Once they cleared out, the main attraction came on: Some two dozen bald eagles appeared, and for a half-hour, swooped and soared above us like the Blue Angels, only silent.

(More: [Backyard Birds: How to Attract Them With the Right Flowers, Shrubs and Trees](#))

Lately, whenever I start to get too cynical about modern life, I think about eagles and their dramatic comeback. By the 1960s, these majestic creatures were on their way to extinction due to hunters and the insecticide DDT.

Thanks to conservation efforts and legal protections, the American eagle — both the bald and golden — was taken off the endangered species list five years ago. Bald eagles are once again thriving along the entire Upper Mississippi River Wildlife and Fish Refuge — a stretch of more than 260 miles of prime bald eagle habitat. In 1963, there was only one nesting pair along the Mississippi; now there are more than 280 pairs. (Second only to Alaska, Minnesota has the largest number of bald eagles, with some 2,300 nesting pairs; Florida is third.)

Last Saturday my friend Chuck, a native Minnesotan, and I took a daylong road trip. We headed south down the Mississippi on Route 61, which is on the Minnesota side. Eighty-five miles south of Minneapolis we came to the quaint river town of Wabasha. As we were driving down its main street, we saw a sign that said, “National Eagle Center,” with an arrow pointing ahead.

“We have to check this out,” I said.

Founded in 1989, the center is a non-profit organization that focuses on conservation, research and educational efforts relating to eagles. The compact, two-story building is perched on the western banks of the Mississippi. Its picture windows offer a panoramic view of nesting grounds on the river’s eastern banks.

From the observation deck you can watch eagles flying by or diving for fish — they can swoop down upon their prey at speeds of 150 miles an hour. The center is open daily from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Admission is \$8 for adults, \$5 for seniors (62 and over) \$5 for kids 4 to 17, and free to children 3 and under.

Talk about an interactive experience. The center is home to four rescued bald eagles: Harriet, Angel, Columbia and Was’aka, as well as one rescued golden eagle from Northern California named Donald. Due to broken wings and other injuries (Was’aka is missing an eye), none of them can adequately fly, and would not survive on their own. They are called ambassadors, greeting visitors at the center, and traveling to outreach programs and ceremonies.

When the center is open, the five birds spend most of their day in the eagle viewing room. Since the birds are tethered as opposed to being behind glass or caged, you get a beak-to-nose experience. You can’t touch them, but you can photograph them. Because eagles are very territorial, every so often one will emit a terrifying screech when it sees another eagle outside the center’s window.

At 31 years of age, Harriet is the oldest of the birds, and something of a star. It’s her noble profile that graces the Minnesota “Support Our Troops” license plates. She was the first bird to come to the center, having been hit by a car in Wisconsin after 17 years in the wild. “The longest an eagle can live in the wild is about 26 years,” said a volunteer named Emily, who was answering questions in the viewing room. Thanks to antibiotics and constant care, Harriet, despite her age, is in excellent shape.

Most premature deaths are not from cars, though. Most, I learned, are from lead poisoning. The lead usually comes from fishing sinkers, which the birds swallow, or from feasting on a deer carcass that was killed by a hunter’s lead bullet.

Emily also informed us that even though eagles like to build McMansion-sized nests, adding onto them every year (one in Florida weighs two tons), they don’t sleep there. The nests are for their eaglets. The parents prefer to hang out on nearby tree limbs. As for being good parents, I wouldn’t go that far. First-born eaglets like to kill their siblings. The parents prefer not to get involved.

Several times a day a volunteer takes one of the birds to the center’s main lobby tethered to his or her arm, which is heavily gloved. You don’t want those talons digging in. An eagle’s grip is 10 times that of an adult’s human hand and can exert up to 400 psi per square inch. Female eagles, I learned, are larger and stronger than males.

In the lobby you can stand alongside the bird and have your picture taken. Some advice: Don’t jerk your arm when being photographed, as I did. The bird may feel threatened and give you a

glance that would scare Tony Soprano. And don't stand behind the eagle when a volunteer is carrying it. I managed to barely jump out of the way when Angel decided to relieve herself.

If you ask nicely, the volunteer may be able to convince the bird to spread its wings for your photograph. You have no idea how impressive those wings are until you're standing underneath them. They span 6 to 7½ feet. Be glad you're not a rabbit.

According to Scott Mehus, the center's educational director, it's not all work for the birds. "Every Tuesday, we take them to the beach to play in the water," he told me. "The other day Harriet managed to catch a fish. On Sundays, we feed them their favorite meal: dead rats. You should be here when we do that. It's definitely a reaction-getter. You'll never eat spaghetti again after seeing a rat's tail slither down one of their beaks. It's the last part they eat."

Had I known I was going to wind up at the center, I would have arrived earlier to attend one of the daily, hourlong lectures, which take place at 11 a.m., 1 p.m. and 3 p.m. Unfortunately, the last lecture of the day had already started when we got there and the room was too packed to hold any more visitors.

Looking through the glass door that leads to the discussion room, I could see a volunteer holding an eagle on his arm. Grandparents, parents and kids were sitting at the edge of their seats, especially when it came time to feed the bird some dead baby chicks. "This is a great intergenerational place," Mehus told me. "People of every age come here. Many come with stories about eagles and their connection to them. Eagles are truly mythical."

But unlike the Indian maiden and her brave who jumped off Lovers' Leap just up the highway, they're very real. And when they go airborne off the rocky cliffs, the constant wind is there to catch them.