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TOP STORY

## Bald eagles take a break in Ellensburg as they make their way north to nest

By MIKE JOHNSTON senior writer  
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An eagle perches in a tree along Brick Mill Road east of Ellensburg on Monday. (Brian Myrick / Daily Record)  
Brian Myrick

Call it a pit stop on a road trip to the far north.

Bald eagles visit the Kittitas Valley about this time every year, and like humans using Interstate 90, they often stop in the Ellensburg area for fast food.

The bald eagles come during calving time, from about December through March, and wait for mother cows to give birth. The birds eat the afterbirth, which helps fuel their trip to Canada and Alaska for breeding and nesting.

Many bald eagles also perch on trees along the Yakima River canyon southeast of Ellensburg where they go after fish, their more typical fare.

Wildlife biologist Jeff Bernatowicz, with the state Department of Fish and Wildlife, said the eagles likely have flown inland from coastal areas, like the Skagit River, and along the Columbia River and now are heading north to their nesting sites, mostly in British Columbia, Alaska and other northern locations.

"They're stopping off here looking for food wherever they can find it," Bernatowicz said. "They're scavengers, too, so they're not very picky about what's on the menu."

The carcasses of fish, other birds and mammals, large and small, are somewhat easy meals in that the eagles don't have to expend their limited energy going after live prey, he said.

"Their (migration) route takes in an extremely vast landscape," Bernatowicz said. "It's a huge geographic scope across North America."

## **Birdwatchers**

The birds' annual visit is a treat for birdwatchers.

Jan Demorest and Steve Moore of Ellensburg drive Kittitas Valley roads looking for bald eagles at calving time and other birds and raptors. They sometimes take along Jan's 90-year-old mother, Lee Demorest, who delights in seeing the big, bald eagles

as much as they do.

"Growing up here (in the Kittitas Valley) you know about the bald eagles, but they seem to always be a surprising treat when you come upon them," Demorest said.

A friend told her last week that she drove through the Yakima Canyon the week before and counted 15 bald eagles perched along the river and two or three flying.

She and her husband have backpacked and hiked for more than 25 years all over the United States. They are active birders in the Kittitas County Audubon Society, but are still moved when they catch sight of a bald eagle flying or hovering on a thermal updraft.

"They are so magnificent; I never get tired of watching them," Demorest said. "It's fun to see them waiting around in a field, for the afterbirth. They have kind of a hobbling walk and they seem hunched over."

### **Keeping an eye out**

Deborah Essman, an avid, amateur naturalist in the Kittitas Valley, said those watching for bald eagles sometimes confuse them with golden eagles because juvenile and immature bald eagles don't have a fully white head and white tail feathers. They're mottled with brown and light areas, similar to golden eagles.

"They (golden eagles) have feathers all the way down to the base of their claws, like boots; bald eagles have feathers only to half-way down," said Essman, president of the Kittitas County Field and Stream Club and a former state wildlife agent who cofounded a raptor rescue center in Merced, Calif.

In her teaching sessions with children and adults Essman asks what people do when they wade across a stream.

"You roll up your jeans," Essman said. "The (bald) eagle is outfitted to grab fish in water."

She said bald eagles take on their distinctive color pattern when they're about 4 years old, also the age when they start breeding.

## **Cleanup crew**

As for the valley's calving season attracting eagles year after year, Essman said bald eagles' scavenger ways help clean up pastures.

"I like to call it their

'calf-ateria' time," said Essman about eagles feasting on afterbirth. "It's not a very hard meal for them to get, unless they're fighting over it with other eagles, ravens or magpies."

Essman said it could be seen as a somewhat symbiotic relationship in the pasture. The eagles, sometimes as many as five or six standing around on the ground, eat the afterbirth that might attract predators like coyotes, some types of dogs or cougars.

Bald eagles are called opportunistic raptors, or those that go after a wide variety of critters to eat, dead or alive, to keep them alive.

"Sometimes you'll watch an eagle on the ground, just standing there for a long time, not looking for a meal. They're probably stuffed and comfortably digesting it all," she said.

## **Resident eagles**

There likely are only three or four nesting pairs of bald eagles that call Kittitas County home year-round, she said. Two breeding pairs in Upper Kittitas County and one or two in the Yakima River Canyon southeast of Ellensburg.

She said there's a rather well-known nest in the canyon on the west side of the river near milepost 15 in a large, tall Ponderosa pine that many watch as they pass through.

Phil Mattocks of Ellensburg, who has taught ornithology and is a local Audubon member, estimated that one to two dozen migrating bald eagles come to the Kittitas Valley annually, depending on weather, the availability of food along their migration route and other factors.

Mattocks, a former Central Washington University and Heritage University professor now teaching physiology at Pacific Northwest University in Yakima, said eagles have an enduring attraction to many.

"They are dramatic, powerful and attract, oftentimes, much more interest when seen in the wild," Mattocks said. "There's a special attraction about them."

During the local Audubon Society's late December bird count, volunteers recorded 11 bald eagles on one day. The counting area was a 7 1/2-mile diameter circle centered at Ellensburg's west interchange.

A count in 2008 yielded 57 bald eagles. Over the years the average has been around 22 in the December counting.

Mattocks said the initial show of eagles in the valley may have been low this year because of great feeding opportunities elsewhere along their route.

Mattocks said once in a while a bald eagle will appear on Craig's Hill where he and his wife live.

"You could say living in Ellensburg allows you to be closer to wildlife than in the more populated, urban areas of Western Washington," Mattocks said. "(Living here) gives you a better opportunity to not have to go very far before you encounter wildlife, like bald eagles. It's a pleasant encounter."

## Local bald eagles

**Name:** *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, Latin for sea eagle-white head

**County residents:** There may be three or four resident bald eagle male-female pairs in Kittitas County. In both Kittitas and Yakima counties there may be 20 or more breeding pairs that live here year-round.

**Kittitas Valley visitors:** There are no exact numbers of the eagles that migrate into Kittitas County and out at calving time, but one estimate is about 50, likely more.

## If you look for eagles

- Take binoculars or a spotting scope.
- Drive slowly on county roads in beef cattle ranching areas (generally northeast of Ellensburg).
- Park carefully and safely off county roads and don't block farmers and ranchers' roads. Respect private property.
- View from inside your vehicle, or slowly proceed to watch from behind your parked vehicle.

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Mike Johnston