

The Return of the Bald Eagle

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LIVING IN UPSTATE NEW YORK NOT FAR FROM THE HUDSON RIVER at the edge of the Taconic Mountains, I have the good fortune to occasionally witness the presence of the bald eagle in our region.

On my sporadic train rides to and from New York City along the Hudson River, I rejoice when I am able to find a window seat on the river's side. While most other passengers are engaged with their screens, I watch the scenery outside: the sky and its clouds, early morning fog rising over the water, the tide coming in or going out, the waves or patches of smoothness of the water, mirror images, the spreading of invasive plants at the river's edge, the many species of birds that live near or by means of the river. The river valley is beautiful at all times of the day.

And I watch for bald eagles. Sometimes I count how many I see. On a recent trip this summer, coming from New York City at midday, I had four sightings: one bald eagle was sitting low, close to the water's edge; a juvenile bird was flying to a high treetop on which an adult eagle was perched; and a fourth eagle was situated on what appeared to be a nest on a steel structure in the river. While the train rushes by, I catch these glimpses.

I sometimes see bald eagles closer to my home. Once a bald eagle was feeding on the carcass of a deer that had been killed near our house by a car. With binoculars, we observed it from our windows. Or I saw a bald eagle flying over The Nature Institute when we were doing outdoor studies during a summer course. We once watched a group of eagles feeding on a carcass in a field, among them juveniles that lacked the white of head and tail. Some were actively feeding, others were perched in the high trees bordering the field. And we have spotted bald eagles on



our canoe trips in the Adirondacks and Catskill Mountains.

During one of my train rides, I learned that there was a time, a period of over hundred years, when there were no bald eagles nesting in the Hudson Valley region. In fact, there was a time when not one pair of bald eagles was successfully breeding in all of New York State.

Nationwide, in the contiguous United States, the bald eagle was on the brink of extinction.

The disappearance of this bird from our lands, and its subsequent recovery, is a story to learn from, a story of warning and hope.

Here are numbers and dates: Along the Hudson River, after 1890, no breeding pairs of bald eagles were sighted until 1997. So for more than a century, bald eagles apparently did not breed in the river valley where once they lived freely and thrived. In New York State, in 1970, one active but unproductive pair was found. In the contiguous U.S., in 1963, there were fewer than 500 breeding pairs. In 1973, the bald eagle was listed as an endangered species under the federal Endangered Species Act.

What brought about their decline?

There were three main causes. First, the bird was decimated by human predation for various reasons, or for no good reason at all. Second, the bird lost its habitat due to land settlement and agricultural development. It cannot live without clean air and water, ample food supplies, and large, undisturbed stands of trees. The third factor was contamination of the environment by toxic substances.

For example, after World War II, the insecticide DDT was widely and indiscriminately applied in the United States. Land was sprayed with DDT from airplanes. In 1962, in her book *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson was the

first concerned citizen and scientist who drew public attention to the consequences of the use of DDT. One such consequence was that the egg shells of birds ingesting DDT became brittle and broke before a mature fledgling could hatch. The higher one looked in the food chain, the worse the problem became — and the bald eagle lives at the top of the chain. DDT was banned from use in the United States in 1972, ten years after Rachel Carson's book was published, and one year before the eagle was listed as an endangered species.

After so long a period of no bald eagles breeding in the Hudson Valley region, what brought them back?

In 1976, New York's Department of Environmental Conservation began a program of repopulation. In twelve years, biologists captured 198 nestlings of bald eagles, mostly in Alaska, and brought them to New York. They hand-reared them, moved them to suitable habitats, and fed them while the birds accustomed themselves to the new place. When the young eagles could fly, they were released.

In 1989, there were ten nesting pairs in New York State. In 1997, a nesting pair produced the first fledgling in the Hudson Valley, apparently after more than a hundred barren years.

It took the joint efforts, the perseverance, and the resources of many institutions, agencies, and concerned citizens to bring the bald eagle back to the Hudson Valley. A remarkable cooperation took place between various organizations, including the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Greenway Conservancy, the Hudson River Foundation, the National Audubon Society's "Constitution Marsh," the Audubon Center and Sanctuary, New York State's Hudson River National Estuarine Research Reserve, the Palisades Interstate Park Commission and its Bear Mountain State Park, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

In addition to the repopulation efforts, land was purchased for conservation purposes. And so the ban of DDT, along with all the environmental protection measures, allowed the bird to come back.

The numbers continue to increase: in New York State, in 2014, there were 254 nesting pairs; in 2017, there were 323 nesting pairs. On August 9, 2007, the bald eagle was removed from the federal list of threatened and endangered species, where it had been listed for 34 years. Nationwide, the US Fish and Wildlife Service reported in December, 2018, that the number of nesting pairs in the contiguous United States was 9,789.

The caring for the bald eagle in the Hudson Valley region has not ended. As the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation explains on its website: "The apparent return of the bald eagle to the Hudson River does

not mean that conservation practices can end ... Increasing human activity, chemical/toxic contaminants and habitat loss must be monitored and controlled if we want to encourage the eagle population on the Hudson."¹

It is not so difficult to become aware of the disappearance of a bird as large and as magnificent as the bald eagle. However, we could have remained oblivious to its threatened extinction. Today one can be grateful that the alarm was sounded, that the life-threatening conditions were studied and understood, and that action was taken.

With the bald eagle's return and with the restoration of its required habitat, countless other mammals, insects, birds, and fish were also given a habitat. Large enough areas of undisturbed forested land as well as unpolluted rivers, estuaries, and wetlands allow an abundance of other larger and smaller creatures to thrive.

It is not so easy to be aware of and concerned about the disappearance of creatures less conspicuous than the emblematic bird, such as many amphibians, reptiles, fish, insects, spiders, song birds, and more. For example, from Europe and around the world we hear about dwindling populations of butterflies, moths, native bees, wasps, and beetles. When I drive by the many lawns and gardens that look well-kept but are rather sterile and do not support much wildlife — but rather eradicate it through the use of pesticides, herbicides, chemical fertilizers, and the choices made in planting trees, shrubs, flowering plants, and grasses — I sense the responsibility that we all carry in regard to our fellow creatures. This is especially true for those of us who are given a piece of land to own or care for.

The story of the bald eagle's return to the Hudson Valley region teaches us some lessons. We have learned to value the presence of the eagle at the brink of its extinction. We have learned that destroying its habitat and degrading the environment makes the bird vanish. We also learned how much it takes and how high the costs are when we have to undo what in a human-centric way was done unwittingly, carelessly, or worse.

Creatures on earth will remain with us only if we give them space to live, if we do not destroy their species-specific habitats and their food resources. The result of all conservation and restoration efforts, however — if they are successful — is a joyful one.

1. Source: <https://www.dec.ny.gov/animals/9382.html>