

Lake James Environmental Bald Eagle Nest Monitoring

2024 Annual Report

Prepared by Wesley Sawyer, April 2024

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INTRODUCTION

The Lake James Environmental Association (hereafter referred to as LJE), in partnership with the US Fish and Wildlife Service, sponsors a program to monitor Bald Eagle activity on Lake James.

For the previous two breeding seasons, 2021-2022 and 2022-2023, this program was headed by Olya Milenkaya, Ph.D. (Warren Wilson College) and assisted by Daniel Baron. In 2023 LJE decided to transition the Eagle nest monitoring to a volunteer program. To initiate the transition, Olya Milenkaya and Daniel Baron conducted an in-person training event in July 2023 and a virtual training event in August 2023. Approximately 12 volunteers attended these trainings. Wesley Sawyer volunteered to coordinate the nest monitoring activity for the 2023-2024 breeding season and received additional training and resources from Olya Milenkaya. This report will summarize the findings of the volunteer monitoring group for the 2023-2024 season.

BACKGROUND

The Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is an iconic symbol of the United States of America. Once an endangered species, the Bald Eagle population has grown substantially in the past 50 years. According to the NC Wildlife Resources Commission, Bald Eagles' preferred nesting sites are in tall, isolated trees near lakes, large rivers and shorelines where they can hunt or scavenge for fish or other prey.

Bald Eagles and their nests have been observed around Lake James for many years. In her 2023 Bald Eagle report, Dr. Milenkaya documented 10 different nest sites but identified only two of these sites, the sites described as Nest #4 and Nest #5, as being active in the 2022-2023 breeding season and she recommended that these two nests be monitored in the 2023-2024 season. Three of the nest sites listed in Dr. Milenkaya's report were unverified during the 2022-2023 and the report recommended that these sites be investigated to determine whether they will be used as nest sites during the 2023-2024 breeding season.

Therefore, the primary objective of the 2023-2024 volunteer group was to monitor Nest #4 and Nest #5 at least once a week between November 2023 and May 2024, observe eagle behavior in and near the nest for a period of one hour (or more), and record the findings in a spreadsheet. A secondary objective was to visit the sites that were listed as possible Bald Eagle nest sites to determine whether any of these sites became active nest sites in the 2023-2024 nesting season and to investigate any additional reports of nest sightings on, or around Lake James.

METHODS

Nest #4. To observe Nest #4 which is on the northeast side of Lake James not far from the Linville Boat Launch, a schedule was created in which volunteers took turns visiting the monitoring site each week between November 2023 and April 2024. The volunteers who participated in this rotation were: Tom Coffey, Joanne Deyo, Kim Jurell, Ellen and Tom Ross, Wesley Sawyer, Marshall Taylor, Ken and Laura Wark, Lynn Watson, Art Webster, and Martha Whitfield.

Most volunteers would hike out to the nest monitoring site, accessed through the Fonta Flora county park, and sit about 500 feet away from the tree containing the nest, across an inlet on Lake James. Some volunteers chose to use a kayak or boat to monitor the nest site from the lake. Each observation lasted a minimum of 1 hour and volunteers used binoculars and/or a spotting scope to view the nest and search the trees near the nest site for perching adults. Volunteers made a total of 36 visits to this monitoring site starting in early November and recorded adult eagle and eaglet behavior along with time stamps. Monitoring stopped in mid-April once the nest was no longer active.

Nest #5. This nest is on private property on the west side of Lake James and one of the volunteers, LuAnn Ellsworth, could see this nest from her property and agreed to monitor this nest using binoculars and a spotting scope. 6 observations were recorded between early November 2023 and early January 2024. The eagles were not seen near this nest site after mid-January so no additional data was recorded.

Nests #8 and #9 were possible nest sites not verified during the 2022-2023 breeding season. Wesley Sawyer drove to the GPS coordinates provided by Dr. Milenkaya to attempt to locate the nests and determine if eagles would be using them as nest sites in the 2023-2024 season.

The Bald Eagle observation data submitted by the public via the LJE website was perused to determine whether additional nest sites on or near Lake James had been reported and should be investigated.

Boat Searches for Nests on the Lake. Jack Raker and Art Webster searched by boat along the northern shoreline of Lake James from Canal Bridge to the west of site #8 on February 9th to try to find additional nests but did not find any. Bruce and Wesley Sawyer searched the coves which are located between the east side of the Peninsula, the west end of 1780 and the Enclave in early March since observers reported several sightings of eagles flying toward this area but no nests were found.

OUTCOMES

Summary: Nest #4 was the only active Bald Eagle nest site verified by this volunteer group during the 2023-2024 breeding season.

Nest #4 was used by two adult Bald Eagles during the 2023-2024 breeding season and two eaglets were hatched and fledged from this site. (GPS Location: 35.782283, -81.856209)

As recorded by the volunteers here is a summary of observations of Nest #4:

November 2023	No eagles seen near nest site until Nov 23
December 2023	One or two adult eagles seen near the nest site on various visits, at times repairing the nest
January 2024	January 8: Adult eagle seen sitting in nest, <u>incubation inferred</u> . During January one adult is always on the nest, sometimes eagles can be seen switching places, <u>incubation continues</u>
February 2024	Feb 8: It is inferred that the eggs <u>hatched</u> .



Since the nest is big and deep the small hatchlings are not seen for a couple of weeks but the adults are seen taking turns returning to the nest with food and bobbing their heads as if feeding hatchlings.

Feb 15: First possible sighting of one eaglet
Feb 19: Sighting of one eaglet verified

Feb 21. Photo by Art Webster

March 2024	March 5: Positive sighting of two eaglets March 12: Two eaglets seen to be more active moving in the nest March 22: Two eaglets seen flapping their wings on top of the nest
April 2024	April 2: Two eaglets hopping from nest to branches near nest April 7: Two active eaglets observed on branches behind the nest

April 13: First time since January that no adult eagles or eaglets are seen in or near the nest. The successful fledging of the two eaglets is inferred.

Nest #5 was a disappointment during this breeding season as it was inactive this year.



During November and December, two adult eagles were seen in trees near this nest that was occupied last year but were not seen after early January 2024.

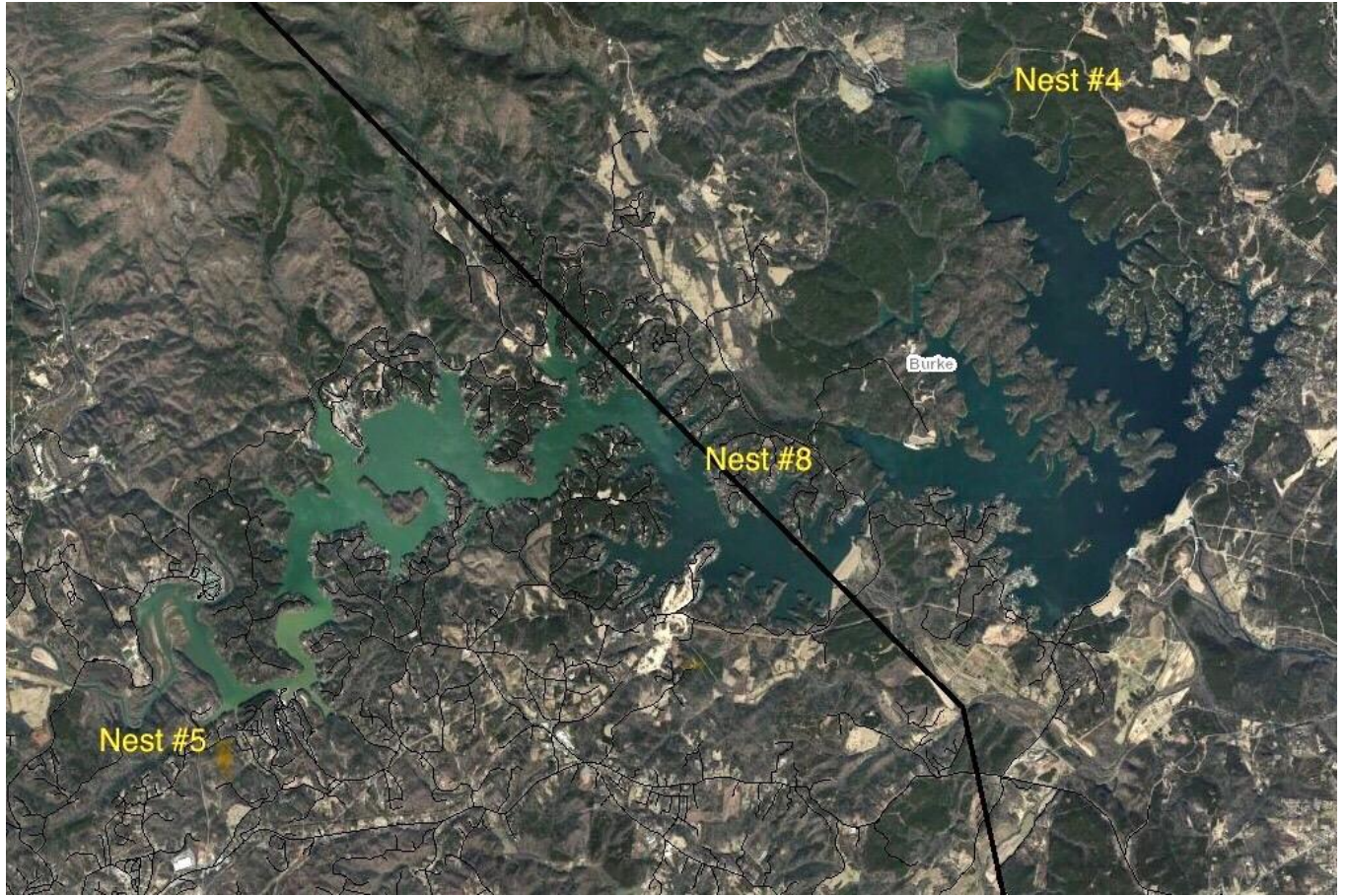
Nest #5 was not used to raise eaglets this year. (GPS Location: 35.710706, -81.997745)

Photo by LuAnn Ellsworth

Nest #8 was reported to LJEa by a private landowner at 2620 Old Nebo Bridge Road in June 2023 who also indicated that two eaglets were seen in the nest. Wesley Sawyer emailed the landowner in December 2023 to see whether the nest, or eagles, had been seen more recently on this property but did not receive a reply. The landowner did not appear to be in residence when Wesley visited the road near the property in January 2024. No eagle's nest was be found when observed from the road. On February 9th, Jack Raker and Art Webster searched the area by boat and found only an inactive nest which appeared to be an osprey nest. In March 2024 an active osprey nest could be seen from the lake in the area previously described as the location of the eagles' nest. (GPS Location: 35.74748489, -81.91183179).

Nest #9 was reported in May 2023 by an unidentified person. The location given was 2701 Kayga Avenue, Morganton. (GPS Location: 35.82687954, -81.82215657). Wesley Sawyer drove to this site twice in January and was able to see a nest in a pine tree across the street from this address. It was not possible to determine whether this nest had ever been an eagles' nest and the nest appeared to be degraded. No eagles were seen on either visit, the nest was not occupied.

Bald Eagle Sightings can be reported by the public by using a link to a survey on the LJEa website. This data has been reviewed and no additional nests sites were reported through this mechanism.



Map shows approximate location of Bald Eagle nest sites monitored during the 2023-2023 breeding season. Outcomes: Nest 4: Two eaglets successfully fledged. Nest 5: Inactive. Nest 8: Osprey nest.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Continue to use the volunteer program to monitor Nest #4 during the upcoming 2024-2025 breeding season. Many of the volunteers expressed their willingness to participate again. Data should be obtained on a weekly basis from December through April or May and observation periods should extend for 1 hour. If possible, identify volunteers with camera equipment capable of capturing pictures of eagles on the nest site.
2. Outreach to the neighbor near Nest #5 should occur near the beginning of the 2024-2025 breeding season in hopes that the eagles will return to this site. If so, this site should be monitored on a weekly basis if possible.
3. Check the Bald Eagle sightings log obtained through the LJEAs website to determine if the data suggests that there may be additional nest sites on, or around, Lake James.

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