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Photo courtesy Liam McCahanahan

MAKING A COMEBACK: The Virginia Inland Eagle Project has been studying the majestic birds in Fauquier for several months and has discovered that the county's population is pretty strong.

Eagles Abound

Study finds strong population here

BY BRUCE TROETSCHEL
Special to the Times-Democrat

Shortly before Christmas, Jolly de Give had a most unusual set of visitors.

"I came home one day about two weeks ago, and was getting the mail, when a strange vehicle pulled into my driveway," recalled de Give, who lives near Paris. "It was hauling a trailer with several deer carcasses on it."

It was a striking sight, to say the least. Was this a group of over-ambitious hunters, bent on bagging every buck and doe in the county?

Instead, they politely asked if she'd be willing to entertain some even more unusual visitors—our national symbol, the bald eagle.

The group members are part of the Virginia Inland Eagle Project, an effort of the Virginia Department of Game and Inland Fisheries to study the size and health of the Piedmont's eagle population.

The deer carcasses were bait, used to lure in the eagles so they could be temporarily trapped and studied. Would she be willing, they asked, to host a dead deer in her yard?

"I agreed, and the next day there were a couple of eagles on the bait,"

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de Give said. "Almost every day since, there have been others. I saw six juveniles and two adults at the same time. I find it extremely interesting."

"I had no idea we had so many eagles," agreed fellow participant Joe Ingersoll of Delaplane. "I knew we had a reasonable population, but to see six of them in my field at one time was a real eye-opener."

There are currently five Fauquier County landowners participating in

the effort, said wildlife biologist Lance Morrow, who leads the study team. There are three sites in Loudoun County, as well, with bait stations spaced roughly every five miles.

"I've visited a lot of landowners, and had close to 100 percent success," said Morrow, who's only had one prospective site turn him down. "When I ask if I can put a deer carcass in their front yard, the families have almost always agreed."

The effort has attracted a lot of interest.

"People have been approaching me asking if they can be one of our sites," Morrow said. "But basically, I have to pick the people. It has to be the right lay of the land, and it has to be the right distance. And it has to be a safe place to lure in all these birds. Some slob with a gun could do a lot of damage."

Participating landowners keep a running diary of eagle visitation to the site, with entries every hour or so throughout the day, e-mailing the information to Morrow each evening.

This allows the biologist and his team to select the most fruitful sites to visit the next morning to see if they



Photo courtesy Virginia Inland Eagle Project

CATCH AND RELEASE: Once captured, eagles are given a health exam before being tagged and released.

EAGLE

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can trap a bird.

The actual trapping is done with what's called a rocket net.

"The net is 40 feet by 60 feet," Morrow explained. "We shoot off three rockets, and they pull it up and over the eagles. Then, we rush in to calm the bird.

A falconry hood is placed over the eagle's head to get it to relax, and also to protect the researchers. "They'll go for your lips or your eyeballs," said Morrow, "so we're very, very careful."

"It was an amazing performance," said de Give, who had the project's first eagle trapped on her property the day after Christmas. "The net had just gone off, and you could see the guys running across the field.

"Once they immobilized the eagle, they did a lot of measuring and sampling and

photographing," de Give continued. "But then, when they released it, it just sort of shook itself and took off. I suspect I will not see her in my field again."

Morrow said processing each bird takes about an hour. They weigh and measure it, determine its gender, and take several photographs. DNA and blood samples are also collected, and sent to Virginia Tech to check mercury and lead levels. Finally, they tag the bird to facilitate future tracking.

They're trying to determine the size of the eagle population, its migratory patterns, and relative health.

"We don't know, and that's a big problem," Morrow said. "This whole area, everything west of I-95, is a wide-open field for eagle research.

"We're trying to get a snapshot in time of how many eagles we might have, and their ages. If we have all adults, that indicates that they're not reproducing. If we have a good mix, that indicates a healthier population. Then, we can compare it year to year.

We're hoping to be able to reproduce our work up to 10 years from now, using the same home sites and families that worked with us this time."

Despite the unsightliness of a deer carcass on their property, and the inconvenience of taking regular sightings throughout the day, the landowners are enthusiastic about the project.

"All of them have written us," said Morrow, "thanking us for the wonderful Christmas present we gave them by allowing them to see the national emblem right there in their own front yard."

"I've always been stopping on the side of the road to watch bald eagles, so they just happened to touch on something I love," Ingersoll said.

But it's not just about viewing a magnificent sight, it's also about preserving that sight for future generations.

"The national bird is still the national bird," said Ingersoll, "and I'm all in favor of anything that protects the bald eagle."