

TWENTY-FOUR EAGLETS: A BANDING ODYSSEY

By John B. Holt, Jr
(Part Two)

(Note: The first part can be found in EBBA News 33: 222 to 233. We had to split it in two parts because of its length. Ed.)

The nest was a shallow, saucer-shaped platform, and I could peer into it easily enough (see cover picture; Mr. Holt is the courageous climber. Photo by Ron Austing. This was taken in Ohio, but it is by far the most suitable picture for our cover. Ed.) by hanging off to one side on its supporting branches and bracing my feet on the terminal upright holding its base. Once tied in, I might also be able to band from this awkward position, but reaching the youngster was something else again. As at Black Creek, I tried to work the eaglet around with a stick from the nest. This time the results were exasperating; he wouldn't budge an inch. All the while the wind was gusting harder and harder; I never felt so close to that great eagle bander's aerie in the sky!

I had a multitude of profanities which I was screaming out periodically more or less at the top of my lungs (a symptom of psychological frustration which seems to manifest itself most frequently at times like this). These were directed primarily at the wind, but the eaglet also got his share along with everything else in general. For once though, my insane wrath finally did some good: Sergej just happened to be passing along the trail (on his way out to the road) and hearing the one sided altercation (even above the wind!) came on the run. He quickly supplied the stick and at no time at all the banding was over with and I was back to good old "terra firma" again. What a difference a stick makes!

The Bond Falls Flowage aerie was far from an ideal one to visit on a day like that, being on a tiny island in the middle of a huge reservoir. Time was becoming a critical factor and at the Ontonagon River we were closer to Bond Falls than we would ever be again. In the evening the wind died down but large black clouds brought a deluge of rain. The Stump Jumper proved inadequate for the trip and we were fortunate to be able to use a more stormworthy craft owned by Bill Weston, the proprietor of a marina on the lake. Here we suddenly found ourselves out on the lake with these huge waves coming at us, and the wind so strong we could hardly communicate with each other. The only reason for had for continuing this madness was that we were just too darned scared to turn back!

The nest tree also left a lot to be desired in the way of stability, a completely dead maple leaning out over the water. One consolation was that the nest was relatively low, only 35' from the ground (or water, as the case may be). In case something should happen, my chances for survival would be rather good but just a little damp. Sergej assured me that in any event the eagles would be rescued first!

We were especially mindful of the possibility that one of the eaglets might be a "jumper" and in a situation like this our ability to effect a successful rescue operation was definitely impaired. As I tied in at the nest, handling the male, I noticed the sibling edging out onto a limb at the far side of the nest. Her moves seemed to be made with some deliberation and she did not seem to be alarmed, but I was sure that I could not reach her at her new location without causing some real excitement! There was no alternative but to climb down and await her next move.

For over an hour the eaglet held her position as we anxiously watched from the ground. Her dilemma was almost comical at times; when the wind gusted strongly, she was strained to her limit and obviously wanted to go back home but just could not bring herself to part with that branch. On the other hand, during periods of relative calm when she could easily have done so, she was perfectly contented where she was.

At long last, there came a meshing of gears, summoning all her strength and courage, she lifted her shoulders slightly into the wind and hopped into the nest.

The eaglet no sooner hit the deck when I was up again, tying in and wielding the trusted stick (readers may recall that a special stick mentioned in part one was used to haul the eaglets toward the bander. Ed.). She made no repeat performance, apparently having learned her lesson from the first escapade.

We made camp that evening at the public access site on Winslow Lake and on the next day decided on a walk-in nest near the North Branch of Paint River. It was a rather unusual aerie in that it was far removed from any large body of water or road, situated near a small beaver pond on a creek surrounded by extensive muskeg. It contained only a single youngster, but this deficiency was offset somewhat by the fact that it looked like an easy one to climb to: built on the lateral branches of a large white pine tree. ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Although I have never met Mr. Holt in person, it is said (by those in the east who know of his exploits) that he has an uncanny ability to locate eagle (and other) nests and probably has found more of them than any other bander in the country. Editor.

The blustery, cool weather continued into the night, with an occasional shower thrown in. The dampness delayed our departure in the morning since the decrepit old jeep would not start. The Dam 10 aerie was still another on which Sergej had been checking from the air but was apparently quite hard to reach from the ground. First we took the overland route, hiking about a mile, until we reached a beaver pond. From there we took a bearing and conducted a search of the area, sloshing around the swampy woods, wading through open muskeg up to our armpits -with quite negative results. After much searching we had to concede defeat!

It was late afternoon on July 2nd as we left the area. I had to be back in Harrison, Ohio on the 4th of July and Sergej still had a survey flight to make.

From time to time in our travels in upper Michigan, we've seen a Raven or two (and many lesser cousins!), stalking the roads and highways. One such bird was found sitting on the road to Prickett Dam, flying for short distances as we approached. It seemed obvious that the bird was not normal and we accelerated in an effort to overtake him and as he went into a bush on the side of the road, I pounced on him. The Raven was a bird of the year, and evidently had some slight injury. After some diagnostic discourse we decided to take him with us to the University of Michigan Station at Pellston where he would be able to convalesce in more affluent surroundings. In the meantime, we force-fed him some corned beef and bread left-overs from breakfast and fixed up temporary quarters for him in the back of the jeep.

We made it to the Prickett Dam reservoir just before sunset, which was cutting it a little close on time, but we decided to go on with it anyway. Launching the boat in considerable haste, we snaked our way through a veritable maze of logs and tree stumps flanking the old river channel in the middle. The sky abandoned with swallows and nighthawks, the former evidently tenants of the numerous dead snags created by the flooding. Finally breaking into the open, we set course to a small island on which the aerie was supposedly located. Sergej had been to this site some years before and distinctly remembered being able to look into it from a high bluff on one side. As we approached, I noticed a puzzled expression on his face: "That's funny," he exclaimed, "the nest should be right over there in that marshy area right next to the bluff. It was in a dead yellow birch, but I think it's gone now!"

We docked the boat on the boggy shoreline and continued on foot to the spot where, according to Sergej the nest had been. Sure enough, there it was, laid out in pieces; and sitting on one chunk, a full grown eaglet

which was quickly captured and found to be alright. Unfortunately, Sergej had not made the follow up flight on this particular nest so we do not know for sure if there were other youngsters lurking about.

A fast and somewhat furious search ensued; Sergej began probing under a pile of rubble which had been the nest, while I pursued a random course around the area, hoping to stumble onto any other survivors.

We found nothing to indicate that there had been more than one eaglet. As it became darker, I went up in another tree and made a new playground for the youngster.

The morning of July 3rd dawned clear, calm and frosty at Marquette County Airport. We were there at 6 A.M. hoping to get underway as early as possible. The only plane available was a Piper Colt so I was relegated to the chore of feeding the raven again - a thankless task at best while that onerous critter bit the heck out of me with every piece of bread I crammed down his ugly gullet.

Our return to Michigamme Slough nest that day must have been anticipated by the powers that be; a wind-fallen poplar blocked our way. Thus, we marched the remaining $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles to the nest site. Once there our worst fears were realized; the aerie was in a heap on the ground and the ill-fated eaglet with the bad foot lay dead beside it, his partner sitting under the nest tree, alive and apparently unharmed. His crop was quite empty and the adults were conspicuously absent from the scene. There were no food remains around. It was indicated that we had ourselves an orphan eaglet whether we liked it or not.

Sergej finally settled on a tentative plan to leave both the eaglet and raven at the U. of M. Biological Station. This would give him time to contact "Sandy" Sprunt who is in charge of the Audubon eagle surveys, hoping that he or one of his colleagues knew of an aerie somewhere with young of comparable size at which our orphan could be situated.

.....And so, our adventures on the Upper Peninsula end with this vignette of us leaving Chrystal Falls in the old Jeep, the "Stumpjumper" on top, our gear plus the raven in back and of course, little "Ernie" propped up on the heap behind the front seat, watching everything and everybody with great interest. One flat tire and eight quarts of oil later I was back in Harrison - minus boar, Sergej and livestock and just in time to stagger to work.

Epilogue: The raven eventually recovered from his injuries and misreable disposition! He was released from the Biological Station at Pellston. I wish I could report a similar good fortune for "Ernie", but despite our best intentions for him, he wound up in a cage at Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, as part of a plumage sequence study by Dr. John Aldrich of the National Museum, which, lamentable as this may be, is probably more conducive to longevity than his hunter and pesticide infested "natural" environment. We are of course sorry to see his potential as future "breeding stock" nullified when it is so desperately needed. There is some solace in the knowledge that if "Ernie" had not been available, a youngster probably would have been taken from another nest. At the time of this writing he is reported to be doing well.

Recovery Data:

599-01722 Bald Eagle banded at Beaton Lake on 6/30/68. "Found dead" near Reno, Minn., on 11/9/69.

599-01724 Bald Eagle banded at Bond Falls Basin on 7/1/68. "Shot" near Lone Oak, Arkansas on 12/29/69.

Another one, banded near Amasa on 6/29/68 was evidently caught in a trap, 3 miles NW of Champion, Mich., on 4/9/70. (Dead-band removed).

Rt. 1, Strimple Rd. Harrison, Ohio 45030.

(Photos pertaining to the "Odyssey" can be found on the remainder of this page and on page 292. Ed.)

Photogenic Eaglet (left) being banded (right). Photos by B. Keith Baldwin

