

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 21, 2009 |

Iconic symbol flies
high over

Jocassee

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PICKENS — It's as much of a patriotic symbol now as it was in 1782 at which time it became our national emblem when the great seal of the United States was adopted.

It stands for freedom and folks describe sightings as "breath-taking" and "an experience to really take in."

For the eight people that filled the boat on Lake Jocassee this week, they would agree. They enjoyed an American Bald Eagle tour in the brisk morning hours on the pristine water that at least eight eagles called home this nesting season.

Park officials at Devils Fork State Park have been conducting eagle surveys since its opening in 1991.

January is nesting season for eagles in the Southeast, said park official, Kevin Evans.

"Each year, we'll go out in January on an official eagle count and most times, we'll find about seven eagles," he said. "Last year we hit an all-time high when we counted 14. This year, it was closer to normal with eight total."

A decision was made close to nesting season that Devils Fork would open eagle watches to the

public, Evans said. Each tour was slated to head out on the morning of each Tuesday throughout the month of January.

"It was a tester run for the program," he said. "The weather was bad or the winds were high on many Tuesdays, and we kept having to put the tours off. Now in February, there are fewer eagles. Next year, we'll do it more often in January and later in the day so it's not so cold."

But the numbing temperatures weren't bothering the eagles' audience as they waited anxiously in anticipation of seeing one in all its natural beauty.

Johnnie Newton, long-time resident of Pickens County, said she had never before seen an eagle in real life.

At 10:03 a.m. on Tuesday, that all changed.

"Look over there," proclaimed Bobby Cassell. "Is that an eagle right there in the tree, about half way down?"

James Mahoney, tour guide, confirmed that Cassell had indeed spotted an adult bald eagle, as it flew across Toxaway River on the northern end of Lake Jocassee.

"That was really amazing," said Newton. "I just had a great feeling that we were going to see an eagle today."

Husband and wife team, Ron

and Diane Letson, spent many years living in Kentucky and had taken a similar tour on Lake Cumberland.

"We've seen them before," Ron said. "When I was a kid in Nebraska, I asked what a bald eagle looked like because they just weren't around. About 15 years ago, we went back and I counted more than 30 near a reservoir about 40 miles north of our home. They certainly are a majestic bird."

For Diane, the thrill of seeing an eagle has yet to diminish, even after seeing them in the past.

"My father-in-law once said to me, 'If you've seen one, you've seen them all,'" she said. "I've never felt that way, ever. It's a momentous occasion whenever it happens."

Mahoney said while Lake Jocassee and the Jocassee Gorges are a favorable location for eagle nesting, there are just over 7,000 eagle pairs that inhabit the United States.

"Eagles mate for life," he said. "If one dies, the other may or may not find another mate."

Even though eagles are relatively prevalent in January, their apparent nesting season, Mahoney said there is no proof that they nest in the 7,500-acre area that makes up Jocassee.

"We are pretty sure they do, but we've yet to find a nest. Until we do, we can't say for certain that they are nesting here," he said.

In 2007, the bald eagle was removed from the endangered species list.

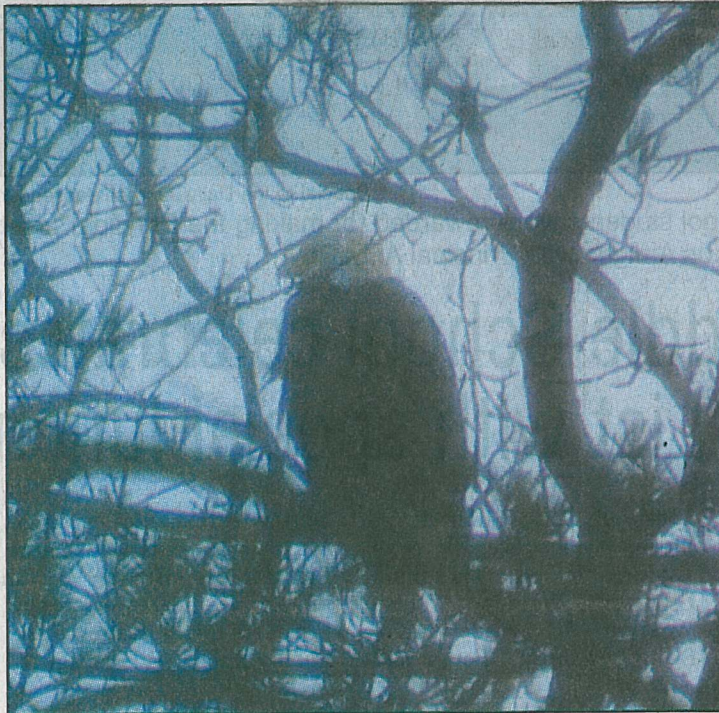
When asked about their behavior and patterns, Mahoney said they prefer to build their homes from a high and clear vantage point.

"You know, they are fairly tame and not people-shy because they aren't hunted or harassed," he said.

Bald eagles are at the top of the food chain, while they lay one to three eggs at a time. Their wingspan can range from 72-90 inches and they have about 7,000 feathers, Mahoney said.

"There's nothing like seeing amazing nature with your own eyes," Diane Letson said. "We should all be very grateful."

For more information on eagle tours for next year, visit www.southcarolinaparks.com.



Jessica Sibley/Staff

Just this year, Devils Fork State Park has begun bringing the public on pontoon boats for eagle tours.



Jessica Sibley/Staff

The official bald eagle count for January 2009 was eight in the Lake Jocassee area.



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Usually, there are eight people that go out on tours each time. From left, Ron Letson, Johnnie Newton and Bobby Cassell.