

Conservation Corner

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It is easy to take liberty for granted, when you have never had it taken from you.

Once again this winter several people have reported bald eagles overwintering on abandoned farm places or along streams and rivers right here in Pocahontas County. Like liberty, we have almost come to take eagle sightings for granted. How easily and quickly we forget.

We forget that at the time of settlement bald eagles, the only eagle unique to North America, soared above the Atlantic Coast from Labrador to South Florida, along the Pacific Coast from Baja California to Alaska, on every large river and lake in the interior, and nested in 45 of what would become the lower 48 states. That's a lot of eagles, estimated at perhaps half a million.

We forget that the eagle has a special place in Native American lore as a symbol of bravery, honor, achievement, and leadership. A Comanche legend tells of a chief whose young son had died. The father offered prayers, and his son came back to life as a big and powerful bird – the first eagle. Today the Comanche Eagle Dance celebrates that legend.

We forget that the leaders of a new nation chose the bald eagle as a symbol for the freedom and liberty for which they fought and died. In 1782, they chose an American Bald Eagle to symbolize these ideals on the Great Seal of the United States. In 1789, the American Bald Eagle became our national bird and George Washington our first president.

We forget the lessons of the bald eagle's story. By 1963, there were less than 500 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states. Today that number has increased to 10,000, which is good news but still far short of the 150,000 nesting pairs at the time of our nation's birth. Iowa had no nesting pairs from 1905 through 1977. Three decades later, Iowa is home to 222 active nests in 92 counties, including Pocahontas. Eagles in Iowa are still a species of Special Concern, however, still contending with loss of nesting and roosting habitat, illegal shootings, and lead poisoning.

Last weekend we traveled across the state for birthday cake, pinewood derby cars, and eagle watching. Perhaps some of you have also viewed the many eagles that congregate along the Mississippi River as it flows through the Quad Cities. Lock & Dam 14 with its riverfront walkway is a popular spot for eagle watching. Other places may have more eagles, but there's nowhere else on the river you can get a closer look at eagles fishing below the dam and roosting in the trees.

I encourage everyone to take advantage of the many opportunities we have to view American Bald Eagles in the wild. Think about it. Our parents, grandparents, or even great-grandparents probably didn't have the chance. If not for some dedicated conservationists, our children and grandchildren wouldn't, either. Last weekend our family had the chance – I trust we won't forget.



Photo by Chad Barr 1-24-16