
The eagle has landed (and Duke knows where)

Contributed by Judy Woodward

A bald eagle is an impressive sight.

Even when viewed through an 80-power magnifying scope on a freezing early spring evening with busy freeway traffic not 30 yards away from the bare branch on which the bird huddles to keep warm, the view conjures up patriotic images and prompts nature-loving thoughts.

As the bird turns his white head to reveal the familiar beaked profile, a viewer feels that the only things missing are Old Glory and the familiar strains of "The Star-Spangled Banner" welling up in the background.

It's a sight that Falcon Heights resident Duke Addicks plans to enjoy a lot in the coming weeks. Addicks, a long-time wildlife volunteer and a recognized expert on both the biology and the folklore of the eagle, will offer nature talks and eagle sightings every Wednesday evening from 6:30 until dusk at a special viewing site near the Spoon Lake fishing area, west of the Highway 61/Highway 36 interchange.

For Addicks, 67, it was retirement from his day job as an attorney with Minnesota League of Cities that allowed him to ramp up his interest in eagles. Although he is a 25-year veteran volunteer naturalist with the Minnesota Valley Natural Wildlife Refuge in Bloomington, he disclaims any special sharp-eyed talents as a birdwatcher. For one thing, Addicks is partially blind in one eye.

He says that's partly why he's drawn to eagles. Once they nest, they aren't that difficult to spot.

"Eagles need a tree that is taller than any of its neighbors to grow a huge nest, which will weigh more than a ton," he explains.

The birds use the same nest year after year, always adding on until eventually it can reach the size of the master bedroom in some of the suburban houses near the viewing site.

Eagles, says Addicks, are one of the great environmental comeback stories of the last 30 years. Once reduced to fewer than 50 pairs by the widespread use of the pesticide DDT, Minnesota's eagle population has steadily risen since DDT was banned in the 1970s.

There are now close to 1500 pairs in the state, many of them in the metro area. As the numbers have risen, the eagles have begun homesteading on some fairly unlikely sites.

Addicks reports that several years ago, when an eagle's nest was spotted practically next door to Highway 36, "Everyone said they were too close to the freeway. They're going to get hit by cars."

The eagles apparently didn't realize the dangers. Three years later, says Addicks, "they're basically oblivious to the traffic."

In fact, it's the cars that may be in danger. Busy freeways are no place to stop for bird-watching, but for motorists who catch sight of the huge nest looming up beside the highway, the urge might be irresistible.

That's where Addicks and the observation point come in. By setting up a viewing point on the tranquil shores of the lake on the other side of the freeway, Addicks hopes to provide a safer way to do some aquiline nature study.

He's also planning to share a lot of eagle folklore. That's the other half of Addicks' expertise. He's a natural storyteller who gets his gifts from his part-Cherokee grandmother.

Addicks grew up in Minneapolis but spent boyhood summers in Georgia on his grandma's farm.

"From the time I could talk," he says, "Grandma would tell me a story in the barnyard as she brushed her hair in the morning. If I could tell her the story the next morning, she would reward me by telling me another story. So I became a storyteller by the time I was three."

A burly man with thick, sandy-white hair and bright blue eyes that scarcely suggest Native American ancestry, Addicks traces his Indian heritage to a hybrid Scottish/Cherokee tribe called the Echota.

All members of the tribe are descended from a common Scots ancestor named John Ross, who intermarried with the

Cherokee. It makes for some interesting ancestors.

Among other distinctions, the Echota are almost certainly the only Indian tribe in the world to have their own clan tartan and sporran.

Thanks to his ancestry, Addicks has had a lifelong interest in all things Indian. It was a logical step for him to begin collecting the legends of the Dakotah Sioux of Minnesota, and that's what led him to the eagles.

"The eagle is the ancestor of all the Sioux," he says. "When a Sioux sees an eagle, he takes out his pouch and offers a pinch of tobacco and he says, 'Grandfather.'"

Addicks tells the story of how the eagle became Sioux. After a great flood, an eagle rescued the sole survivor, an Indian maiden, who asked the eagle to assume the shape of a man and become her consort.

According to Addicks, it was a tough sell. "The eagle was not pleased to become human," he says.

And when Addicks describes the remarkable physical characteristics of the eagle, it's not hard to understand the legendary bird's reluctance to trade its wings for an earthbound existence.

"Their eyeballs are the same size as ours," Addicks says, "but they have ten times as many cones as we do. They see a brilliant world."

Eagles, he explains, can recognize individual birds from three miles away. They can also see underwater, which is great help when it comes to catching the three daily pounds of fish the adult male eagle must provide so his offspring can accomplish the three-month growth spurt that transforms them from a fistful of fluff to a 12-lb. eagle that's ready to leave the nest by mid-June.

"Each cone in an eagle's eye is covered with a layer of oil," Addicks says. "It gives them polarized vision, and the surface layer of water just disappears."

Duke Addicks' eagle-viewing sessions, which are free and open to all, will be held every Wednesday evening through mid-June, from 6:30 to sunset.

For detailed directions on how to reach the lookout point, visit www.dukeaddicksstoryteller.com/dukeprograms.html.

Addicks has recently recorded a CD, "Eagle Tales." Copies may be purchased at Micawber's Books in St. Anthony Park and Coffee Grounds in Como Park.