

Inaugural season of Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative deemed a success

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ADDISON – Officials with the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative are hailing the first year's efforts as a complete success, with eight chicks successfully fledged, and all of them doing well.

“We couldn't be happier with the inaugural season of hacking,” said Eveleen Cecchini, director of Outreach for Earth Stewardship (OFES) one of five partners in the initiative. “Our volunteers were spectacular, the partners complemented each other beautifully, and all eight birds are well into adolescence and proving themselves as flyers and hunters.”

Hacking is a process of raising bald eagle chicks in semi-captivity in elevated boxes, protecting them from predators and providing food, while minimizing human contact and subjecting the birds to the elements. The Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative includes OFES, the National Wildlife Federation (NWF), Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department (VFWD), the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Central Vermont Public Service (CVPS). Federal funding was provided through the efforts of Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt.

Margaret Fowle, a wildlife biologist with NWF, said the birds continue to spend time around Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area in Addison, where they were raised this spring and summer, but some of them may have left the area. It is possible to identify the individual eaglets by using a spotting scope to read the small metal bands they carry on their legs.

“They all seem strong, and appear to be eating well,” Fowle said. “They have often been seen in small groups, occasionally even near more mature eagles.”

The Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative was created to help restore a breeding bald eagle population to Vermont. Adult bald eagles are seen occasionally across the state, but none have successfully nested here since the 1940s, when the last bald eagle chick was hatched at Lake Bomoseen.

Each of the partners has specific roles in the initiative. The Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department contracted with NWF to coordinate and manage all aspects of the program. The VFWD also provides the home for the hack boxes at Dead Creek and works with the partners on educational efforts. OFES coordinates educational efforts and the day-to-day eaglet care with the help of numerous volunteers. The USFWS provides expertise and helps bring eaglets from other states to be raised in Vermont. CVPS provides equipment, volunteer labor and materials for hack box construction, and developed the initiative's website, www.cvps.com/eagles, which includes live eaglecams during the hacking season.

Volunteers played a critical role this year, which is expected to be the first of three hacking seasons. Eight to nine more bald eagle chicks are expected to be raised in both 2005 and 2006.

“The volunteers made this work,” said State Game Warden Brad Mann, one of the state's key participants. “Their energy and round-the-clock care ensured the success of these eight birds.”

Steve Costello from CVPS said 2005 will bring some minor changes to the initiative, including the use of telemetry so officials can track the birds' movements once they've fledged.

“We're already thinking about how we can use the website to provide the public with 'eagle updates' that track their movements,” Costello said.

Michael Amaral of the USFWS noted Vermont is the only state except Hawaii that lacks a breeding population of bald eagles. “In four or five years, when these birds are sexually mature and should return to Vermont, we're hopeful that they'll help change that,” he said.