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WILD NATURE

American bald eagle makes comeback along Pittsburgh's three rivers



By Cristina Corbin
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Some 250 years since the American bald eagle nested along all three of Pittsburgh's rivers, the iconic bird is making a comeback -- and a live webcam is capturing the eaglets hatching in real-time.

Six adult eagles have been spotted in nests the birds built along three of the city's major rivers in Allegheny County -- one nest on the Monongahela River, another within view of the Allegheny River and a third in an undisclosed location along the Ohio River.

"The American bald eagle is in our psyche -- we've heard about it since childhood."

- Jim Bonner, Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania

The return of the majestic bird to the area has not only excited bird watchers and biologists, but has brought an "enormous sense of pride" to the entire community in Allegheny County, according to the **Audubon Society of Western Pennsylvania**.

"People who are not even birders are thrilled," Jim Bonner, the society's executive director, told FoxNews.com. "It's awe-inspiring to see this magnificent creature return. The American bald eagle is in our psyche -- we've heard about it since childhood. Everyone can identify."

At 2:30 p.m. on Friday, an eaglet hatched as the mother eagle, who had recently fought off a raccoon, watched over her eggs -- and the **entire birth was captured live by a web camera** created by the Murrysville-based PixController Inc., which is working with the Pennsylvania Game Commission. A second eaglet hatched over the weekend, and the third and final egg is expected to open any time Monday, Bonner said.

Click here to view the eagles

The bald eagle, America's national bird, is the only eagle unique to North America. The bird, most commonly found in Alaska, was declared endangered in the 1970s, when it was discovered that pesticides including DDT were killing off the species. An accumulation of the chemical in the eagle's body weakened egg cells, causing the bird to lay eggs that would break or crack prematurely.

While the bald eagle was eventually removed from the Endangered Species list, protections are still in place in many parts of the country to ensure the eagle's population does not again plummet. Allegheny County recently removed the bird from its "threatened species" list, according to Bonner.

The sighting of six adult eagles and the birth of their young has given hope the majestic bird will return in abundance to the Allegheny region after more than some 250 years. "The eagles are the comeback story and a great demonstration of a lot of things going right," Bonner said.

In the 1700's, mature tall trees -- a natural nesting habitat for the birds -- were stripped from hillsides surrounding Pittsburgh's three major rivers to meet lumber and fuel demands. A century later, industrialization led to heavy pollution of the rivers, which in turn killed off fish populations the eagles thrived on. In the mid-20th century, eagles, as well as other bird species, began dying off due to the widespread use of DDT, a colorless and tasteless insecticide that was eventually banned from use.

Bonner said that by the 1980's, only a few nesting bald eagles could be found in the entire state of Pennsylvania. A breeding study conducted statewide between 2004 and 2010 found no bald eagles nesting in Allegheny County.

Half of the world's population of bald eagles -- approximately 70,000 -- reside in Alaska. The birds can be found "anywhere you have open water," Bonner said, noting that it is common to see them in places like coastal Florida.

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