



Audubon | FLORIDA

EagleWatch

Annual Report 2023 - 2024

Behind the Binoculars:

NOTES FROM THE EAGLEWATCH PROGRAM MANAGER



Each Bald Eagle nesting season brings its own rewards and challenges. Inactive nests reactivate, keeping volunteers on their toes, and opportunities for education and advocacy yield gratifying conservation wins. Some seasons start with obvious challenges, like a hurricane, but the 2024 nesting season brought subtler threats to Florida's nesting eagles.

EagleWatchers observed and documented platform removals from cell towers where eagles once nested, which in many cases made it impossible for the eagles to rebuild and raise eaglets there. This is concerning in areas like Tampa Bay, where the majority of eagles nest on cell towers. See page 4 to read more about this issue and the impacts it may have had on productivity this season.

We are also closely monitoring implementation of the new federal general disturbance permit process which issues instant permits without review to applicants who self-identify that they meet the permit requirements. Keeping track of nests with disturbance permits informs our monitoring efforts so that we know if law enforcement should be called out for an illegal disturbance.

Despite these new challenges, EagleWatch celebrated another successful nesting season, with 764 volunteers monitoring 1,278 nests. Monitoring data for 2024 showed that productivity (fledglings per occupied nest) was similar to last season (1.24 compared to 1.22) and the fledge rate (percentage of chicks that survived to fledge) remained steady at 92 percent. Over my eight years in this role, the percentage of occupied nests that successfully fledge young has remained stable at around 80 percent.

As we prepare for the 2025 nesting season, EagleWatch volunteers will continue to be on the front line of Bald Eagle conservation, collecting critical data to track nesting trends and inform management decisions.

Shawnlei Breeding, *EagleWatch Program Manager*
eaglewatch@audubon.org

2023-2024 BREEDING SEASON BY THE NUMBERS



1.24

EAGLE FLEDGLINGS
PER OCCUPIED NEST



1,278

NESTS MONITORED IN
53 COUNTIES



92%

1,118 OF 1,221
NESTLINGS FLEDGED



122*

JUVENILE EAGLES BANDED AND
RELEASED SINCE THE START OF
THE AUXILIARY BANDING STUDY

*INCLUDES 17 JUVENILE EAGLES BANDED
AND RELEASED THIS SEASON

Cover: Bald Eagle.
Photo: Jeff Smith/Audubon Photography Awards



◀ Bands placed on rehabilitated Bald Eagles before they are released from the Raptor Trauma Clinic allow Audubon to record information on nest selection and success. Photo: Tim Barker.

First Auxiliary-banded Eagle Nests in Winter Park

Since 2017, juvenile Bald Eagles released from the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey fly away with an extra piece of jewelry. In addition to the silver federal band issued by the U.S. Geological Survey, released eagles receive a green or black band as part of the Center's auxiliary band study to determine if the type of nest a chick *hatches in* influences the type of nest it *chooses* as a breeding adult. Eaglets hatched in natural nests (in trees) receive green bands, while those hatched in nests atop human-made structures, like cell towers, get black bands. Seven years in, the study is turning a corner into a new phase as some of its first banded birds are beginning to breed. EagleWatch plays a critical role in resighting these birds.

Bald Eagles reach sexual maturity and are ready to raise their own families for the first time at around five years old. The first auxiliary-banded birds hit that milestone in 2022 and EagleWatch volunteers have since reported at least two auxiliary-banded eagles nesting.

Back in April of 2018, a young eaglet was rescued from the ground below a cell tower nest in Bartow, unable to fly. The Audubon Center for Birds of Prey treated and rehabilitated the bird for three weeks before fitting her with a black band, 06/A, and releasing her into a nature preserve in Haines City.

Five years later, in the fall of 2023, 06/A was spotted hanging around a cell tower nest in suburban Winter Park. The nest, monitored by EagleWatch volunteers, had been occupied by another nesting pair in previous seasons, but with no confirmed sightings of the original female this season, it appears 06/A took over the nest.

After fledging two chicks in April, 06/A has been seen back at the same nest already this fall. Resight data for 06/A, her nesting choices, and her fledglings' success have begun to unravel the nesting preferences of these eagles, which will provide natural resource managers with critical information as we protect this iconic species now and into the future.

➤ If you see a banded eagle, report the band to the **Bird Banding Lab** or to the EagleWatch program at eaglewatch@audubon.org.

To learn more about the Audubon Center for Birds of Prey or EagleWatch, visit cbop.audubon.org.

EagleWatch volunteers played a pivotal role in protecting an eagle nest on Marco Island from the threat of development, while keeping a close eye on cell phone tower changes that could impact future nesting birds. Photo: Rosemary Tolliver.



EagleWatch Volunteers Advocate for Eagles Across the State

To protect vulnerable raptors this year, EagleWatch volunteers worked with local governments to safeguard nests in their communities while alerting the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to a potential new threat.

VICTORY ON MARCO ISLAND

Rosemary Tolliver, an Eaglewatch volunteer since 2018, monitors a nest on Marco Island and in 2021, the land surrounding the nest went up for sale. Tolliver attempted to nominate the land for purchase by the county as part of its Conservation Collier program, but soon learned that only the property owner is eligible to do so. Working with a city councilman, Tolliver got in touch with the listing's realtor and eventually the owner, who was supportive of taking the property off the market and nominating it for purchase by Collier County.

From there, Tolliver and Audubon of the Western Everglades (AWE) created grassroots campaigns to drum up support for the purchase. Tolliver created flyers to post at local businesses, spoke at county commission meetings, and sent letters of support. AWE mobilized its membership, driving dozens of calls and emails to the Collier Board of County Commissioners. Audubon Florida also advocated for its membership to support Conservation Collier during the budgeting season as the program faced funding cuts.

Last fall, Tolliver got the news she had worked toward for more than two years: On October 24, 2023, the Commission approved the purchase of 3.22 total acres, encompassing the property with the nest and a couple of adjacent parcels.

Tolliver says she burst into tears of joy, relief, and exhaustion. "I went to the nest site the next morning and told the eagles their home was safe," she adds.

Since then, the property has undergone a series of restorations, including the removal of invasive plants. The habitat is improved not just for eagles, but many other species that call Marco Island home.



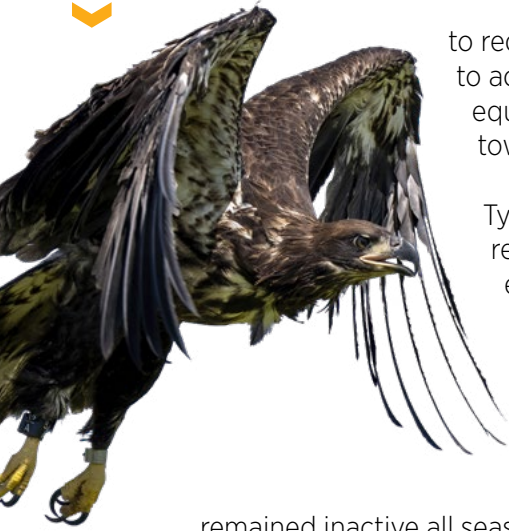
Not only did Tolliver get the county to protect this property, she was surprised on October 30, 2023 with a bench inscribed "Rosemary's Perch" placed behind one of the houses that backs onto the property. "You could have knocked me over with a Bald Eagle feather when I saw that bench," she said. Photo: Rosemary Tolliver.

SYSTEMATIC LOSS OF CELL-TOWER NEST SITES LEAVES EAGLES HOMELESS WHERE TREES ARE SCARCE

Across Florida, Bald Eagles build nests on cell phone towers. Roughly 20 percent of nests monitored by the EagleWatch Program occur on human-made structures like these; each summer, however, some of these nests are removed under federal permits for structure maintenance or equipment upgrades. Unfortunately, when eagle pairs returned to nest in the 2023-2024 season, many found that not only had their nest been removed (under federal permit), but the platform structure that held the nest had also been removed.

EagleWatch Program Manager Shawnlei Breeding spoke directly to U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) officials about the platform removals and learned that, regrettably, the current permits do not specifically prohibit structure alterations that would prevent Bald Eagles from nesting there in the future. This new trend of platform removals was likely prompted by the need

Juvenile Bald Eagle. Photo: Tim Barker.



to reduce the weight load on towers to accommodate the heavier 5G equipment and remain within the towers' weight limit.

Typically, if a tower nest is removed under permit, the eagles will just return and rebuild in the fall. But without a platform on which to build, pairs were unable to get any sticks to "stick" in the open space—as a result, many of those nest locations

remained inactive all season. One tenacious pair in Bradenton elected to rebuild their nest on a lower array on the tower, which still had a platform, and eventually fledged two chicks. However, not every pair found a suitable work-around.

Eliminating cell phone towers as possible nest sites could have a negative impact on nesting success for Florida's Bald Eagles. EagleWatch monitoring data for the 2024 season shows that only 69 percent of the nesting attempts on human-made structures, including cell towers, produced fledglings compared to 82 percent for nests in trees. The failure to transition from showing interest in the location to actually laying eggs or hatching chicks in the nest could be explained by the loss of cell tower platforms on which to build. Once the pairs succeeded in hatching chicks, however, the survival rate of chicks in nests in human-made structures was similar to that of nests in trees (93 percent vs. 91 percent respectively).

"If platform removals continue, it raises concerns for the future of nesting populations in counties like Pinellas and Hillsborough, where 60 percent of Bald Eagle nests are now on human-made structures," explains Breeding.



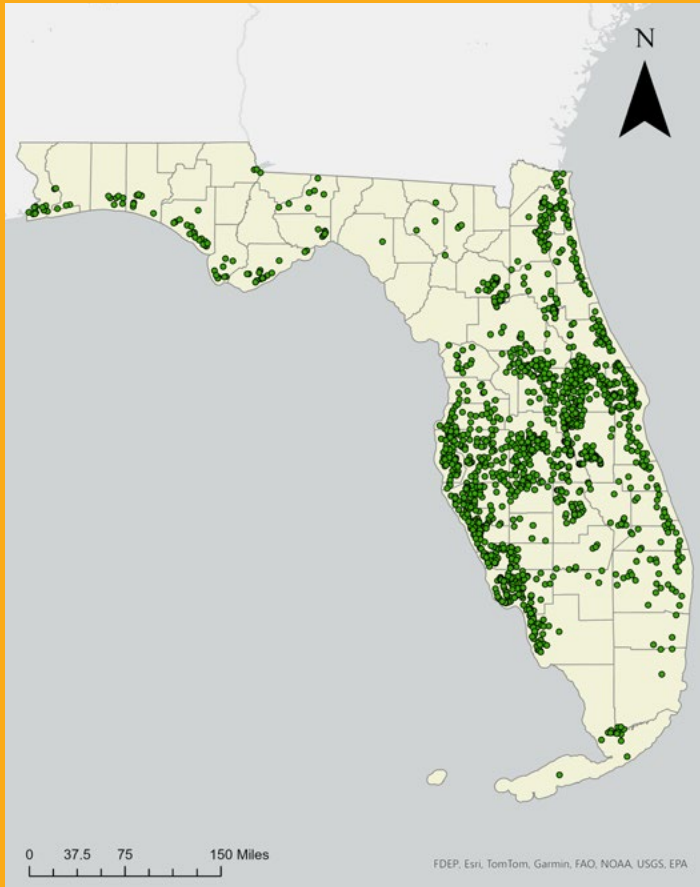
Bald Eagles often use cell phone towers as nesting sites. Photo: P. L. Carrillo.

In rapidly developing counties, fewer trees are available for eagle nests. Losing any nesting sites, natural or human-made, is especially problematic for a species like the Bald Eagle that has strong nest site fidelity while also being fiercely territorial. Loss of natural habitat is forcing eagles to nest closer together than ever, further reducing options for a pair to relocate without risking injury or death due to territory fights with neighboring pairs.

EagleWatch volunteers will play a vital role in documenting any changes to tower structures as we continue to monitor this trend. Data from the current season and beyond will be crucial in proving the impacts of these decisions as we engage with USFWS and communication companies to create solutions that benefit both the eagles and the cell tower owners.

Development is forcing eagles to compete for nesting sites and hunt within smaller territories. Losing cell phone towers as nesting sites could exacerbate these problems. Photo: Sandy Hollenhorst.

Juvenile Bald Eagle.
Photo: Tim Barker.



Support Bald Eagle Conservation in Florida

Audubon's conservation efforts and success are in large part due to the donors, supporters, and partners that fund our work. Gifts to Audubon EagleWatch will support improved data systems and reporting, statistical analysis, and advocacy for eagles. Help us fund the next phase of eagle conservation in Florida.

VISIT CBOP.AUDUBON.ORG
TO MAKE A GIFT TODAY

Bald Eagle nests monitored by EagleWatch in the 2023-2024 season.



Thanks to the generosity of our donors and supporters, we are able to accomplish so much.

THANK YOU FOR SUPPORTING AUDUBON EAGLEWATCH
2023-2024 NESTING SEASON



The Batchelor
Foundation

Fish & Wildlife
Foundation of Florida

 **Audubon** | FLORIDA

1101 Audubon Way, Maitland, Florida 32751
Tel: 407-644-0190 | cbop.audubon.org



@AudubonCenterforBirdsofPrey



@AudubonFL & @AudubonCBOP

