

Six for the New Year

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Bobby Mize and I participated in the Christmas Bird Count of Stanly County, N.C., to lend support to Morrow Mountain State Park, which has coordinated the count for several years. We had been assigned the Yadkin-Pee Dee River section for the count. Having gone canoeing over the Christmas holidays in 62°F weather, I was looking for a good reason to be back on the water. I had been the seasonal naturalist at Morrow Mountain the summer of 1977, with free access to a Wildlife Commission canoe, which I used for exploring as many marshes and creeks as I could find. So I knew the area. Another reason I was eager to go was that there had been reports of Bald Eagles in this area for the past several winters. I had seen Golden Eagles in the wild, but never Bald.

Friday and Saturday, the last day of 1982 and the first day of 1983, were identical. Both were heavily overcast with no wind, and threatening rain that never came. We put our canoe in at the Alcoa Boat Access Area on the Falls Reservoir and paddled down the lake to the Falls Dam, got out, and walked around the fence to the top of a small rock outcrop to look down on Lake Tillery. We located our first raptor of the day, a mature Red-tailed Hawk, sitting in a tree on Morrow Mountain State Park's lake shore. I always check this outcrop for a small red sedum called *Diamorpha smallii*. This is the first place it was ever found. John Small found it here in 1894 and it has been found on many other rock outcrops since then, but its "type locality", as it is called by botanists, was destroyed in 1919 with the construction of the Falls Dam by Alcoa. Still, I always check the area, hoping to find the sedum there again. The Falls Dam not only destroyed the *Diamorpha* population, but also what is regarded as the largest waterfalls in the state, if not the entire southeast, in terms of volumes of water. The Yadkin River went from 1800 feet wide at Badin to 60 feet as it gorged its way through the Narrows for 3 miles before dropping over a rhyolite dike. The roar of what was known as The Great Falls of the Yadkin could be heard 4 miles away.

After checking down-river, Bobby and I paddled up the western shoreline of the Falls Reservoir. The west bank belongs to Alcoa and the east to Uwharrie National Forest. We were checking for birds that would come to the water's edge to drink and sometimes feed. Titmice, chickadees, woodpeckers, sparrows, and goldfinches could be seen and heard with ease as we glided silently by. Suddenly a large bird took off from the eastern shore, just ahead of us. We had been upsetting the local population of Great Blue Herons all morning, but this was different. We followed the dark bird's powerful flight up-river and across the lake with our binoculars.

"Rough-legged Hawk."

"No, I don't think so. It's dark-breasted all right, but it's the wrong habitat. Rough-legs are open-prairie birds. I've only seen them in large open fields."

"Look, he's trying to take the perch from another large bird."

Having failed to dislodge the second bird, the first one flew on up the river and landed on the west shore about a mile away. We started angling the canoe across the river toward the second bird, trying to get close enough to identify it. Bobby had his

spotting scope mounted on a gun stock in the bottom of the boat. "Let me get my scope," he said.

"I'm afraid the bird might think it's a gun and fly off before we find out what it is. Go ahead, but move slowly. Can you see him in the scope? I can make out a whitish head. He's getting ready to fly! No, he's just turning around."

"Awwh."

"What is it?"

"His tail is pure white and so's his head. It's a mature Bald, which means that the first one we saw was an immature Bald."

"Give me the scope; let me see."

"Look, on the left, there's a third one."

About 80 yards away, directly off our port side, sat another immature Bald Eagle.

"I'm getting my camera out. Let's see how close we can get to the immature before he flies." We were both grinning from ear to ear.

"No one's going to believe we saw three Bald Eagles in one day. No one . . ." That's when the fourth one flew over our heads. It had come from down-river, behind us, so we didn't see it until it had passed over, flying with slow, powerful strokes about 150 feet off the water. It also went up-river and landed on the west side.

"The immature's taking off."

"So's the mature one."

We continued paddling up-river watching the flying eagles until they landed again. The immature, which had been perched closer to us, joined another immature and a subadult whose head and tail were a smoky gray, but probably would be white next year. Bald Eagles require 4 to 5 years to become fully mature, breeding adults.

"How many eagles do you see?"

"I see five."

"I see five also. Describe where you see them."

"Three together on the left in the poplar."

"Yes, I see those."

"One on the left, way up-river at the bend."

"Yes, I see that one also."

"One silhouetted against the sky at the tallest point on the hill to the left of the one at the bend."

"I didn't see that one. Now I see six eagles."

"Where is your sixth one, the one I don't see?"

"I'm not believing this. LeGrand won't either. [The standard joke at Iredell County bird counts is that if you see anything rare, don't bother to put it down because Harry won't believe you anyway.] All right, let me describe the positions for the six I see. Three together in the poplar, one at the bend, which makes four. One silhouetted against the sky at the high point, which makes five, and the sixth one is below the one silhouetted in the trees. I believe it's the mature one we saw earlier."

"Yes, I see it. Now I see six also. Four immatures, one subadult, and one adult."

"Right. That's what I see. Put them on the bird count list. What a way to start the New Year!!!"

TABLE 1. Summary of Bald Eagle sightings on the Yadkin-Pee Dee River system in North Carolina, January through May 1983.

Date	Birds	Observers
1 January	4 immatures 1 subadult 1 adult	Greene and Mize
12 January	5 immatures	Paul Hart, Bill Brokaw, Bob Mayer
13 January	2 adults 1 subadult	Dick Brown
15 February	3	Greene (morning)
	3	Greene and Wade Stubbs (afternoon)
27 February	3	Greene with Ann Taylor
12 March	1 immature	Mize and Betty Boyd Sides

ADDENDUM

Table 1 summarizes Bald Eagle sightings from the Yadkin-Pee Dee River system near Badin, N.C., during the winter of 1983. Included are reports submitted to Harry E. LeGrand Jr. for use in "Briefs for the Files" and *American Birds*. On 23 May all observed raptors were soaring. If any eagles were still present, they were too high to be seen or were not in the immediate area.

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