

Eagles across the border!

*Canada helping to restore
the American national emblem*

By William H. Metcalfe

BACK IN 1982, parts of the United States were no longer the home of the American national bird, the bald eagle. Particularly in the east, widespread use of the pesticide DDT, habitat destruction and hunting had brought about extinction of the species in certain areas.

In that same year, Chancellor Helmut Schmidt of West Germany took a step that would lead, without his realizing it, to the eventual restoration of the U.S. bald eagle population. That year marked the bicentennial of the choice of that bird as the U.S. national emblem, and Schmidt sent President Ronald Reagan a gift of two bald eagles to observe the anniversary.

At the time, however, American law forbade the import of live birds of prey. The ban placed Reagan in a quandary: to refuse the birds would insult an ally; to accept them would be against the law. A loophole had to be found. Fortunately for international relations and his country's eagle population, one was quickly found and Schmidt's gift was able to stay.

The result had a more far-reaching

effect. It was immediately recognized by Jack Swedberg, a wildlife photographer at the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, that the same loophole could be used to bring in young eagles from Canada. Such birds could begin to restore the species in his state. (The last record of bald eagles breeding in Massachusetts was in 1903.)

At this point the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service became interested and eventually gained U.S. government approval of the reintroduction plan. That was in 1983. An arrangement with Manitoba was the first to be made. It resulted in birds going to Massachusetts and New Jersey. Since then, Manitoba birds have gone only to New Jersey, while Massachusetts is getting its birds from Nova Scotia.

Later in 1983, a plan to transplant bald eagles from Saskatchewan to Pennsylvania was set up. British Columbia has also joined the list of donor provinces, sending its young birds to California. British Columbia has far more bald eagles than any other province — more than 15,000 in summer,

with additional birds in winter due to an influx from Alaska. The total summer population in Canada is about 40,000 birds, a figure that indicates we can well afford to make the gifts.

Jack Swedberg thus became one of the stars in an important wildlife success story. Manitoba members of the cast included three provincial naturalists (Robert Nero, David Hatch and William Koonz) and a young Winnipeg medical doctor whose spare time activity has made him one of the leading North American authorities on bald eagles. He is Dr. Jon Gerrard.

It was Gerrard whom Swedberg first approached when he sought to get young eagles from Manitoba. Gerrard put him in touch with Nero, who turned him over to the appropriate provincial authorities. Hatch and Koonz found the nests from which eaglets could be taken and Gerrard helped in early surveys.

Hovering over the whole operation like a blessing was the memory of a Canadian who died nearly 30 years ago but who, perhaps more than any other



Above: once prolific, the official symbol of the American nation has disappeared from many parts of the United States. Pesticides, loss of habitat and hunting are to blame.



Left: Jack Swedberg, photographer with the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, initiated the plan to release Canadian bald eagles in his state. With a docile eaglet under one arm, Swedberg climbs to a hacking cage that will be the bird's temporary home.

Eagle Days, and until 1983 had been held only in the United States. He was co-editor of a book, *The Bald Eagle in Canada*, which contained the proceedings of the Winnipeg conference. He is also the author of a smaller book, *Charles Broley, An Extraordinary Naturalist*.

Last year Gerrard conducted a survey of the Lac la Ronge area of northern Saskatchewan. Some years before that, he estimated the number of bald eagles in all of northern Saskatchewan at 10,000. He has given a rough estimate of between 5,000 and 8,000 eagles in northern Manitoba. The provincial naturalist, Koonz, on the basis of his own northern surveys, set the number at 7,000.

To most people, removing eaglets from their nests would seem to be a hazardous undertaking. We assume that the ferocious beaks and talons of adult eagles would quickly end the careers of most nest-robbers.

Actually, there is very little danger from the parents, according to Koonz and Gerrard, who have visited hundreds of eagle nests. The big birds are careful to keep out of range, either on a tree branch some distance away or circling in the air above. Their only effort to save their young consists of anxious screams.

Koonz, however, is living proof that there is danger from the eaglets themselves. Within six weeks of hatching, they possess lightning-fast reflexes and their talons are as sharp as an adult's. Several years ago, as he was reaching into a cage to grab a young bird, it sank its talons deep into his forearm. The pain was excruciating and it was months before the wound healed. "Even today when I think about it," he says, wincing, "it starts to hurt again."

The eaglets are taken in the first week of July. The Americans are permitted to take only one of two birds in a nest. If there is only one eaglet, it cannot be removed.

The nests are usually found high in tall trees, near rivers or lakes. The climbers wear spurs to help them get up the high trees, though sometimes they

use rope ladders. They wear hard hats, sometimes gloves, but never goggles (choosing good vision over protection from unlikely attack). When a climber grabs a bird, he carefully places it in a bag and sends it down a special line to his groundman. Before he leaves, he is often able to band the remaining eaglet. Meanwhile, the groundman removes the bird from the bag and places it in a pet carrier with carpeting on the floor. This will be its home until it reaches its U.S. destination.

It usually takes three days for the Americans to get their quota of eaglets. Once they do, the birds are flown home, each in its own pet carrier and with a plentiful supply of fish, their favourite food.

The best time for the birds to be taken from nests is when they are six weeks old. If an attempt is made earlier, they may not be ready for travel; if later, there's a good chance they will escape capture by flying from the nests. At six weeks, they are still not old enough to have become attached to the nesting district. They will adjust quickly to their new area, come to regard it as home and, when they mature, will likely nest there.

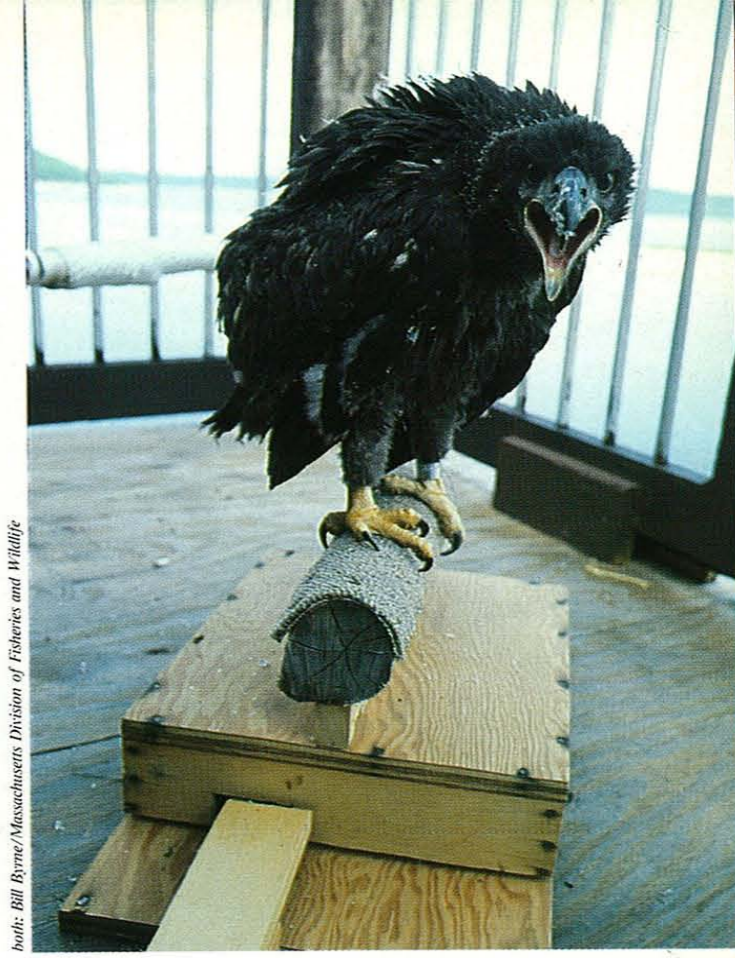
In that first summer of 1983, Manitoba permitted six eaglets to be taken, four for Massachusetts and two for New Jersey. Since then, the quota has been raised to 10 and all have gone to New Jersey. Except for 1983, when the eaglets all came from nests near Bissett in southeastern Manitoba, they have come from more northerly parts of the province.

Manitoba doesn't charge for the eaglets, but the receiving government has to pay for getting the birds and also for an annual survey to see if the province can continue to spare them. Hatch conducted the 1983 survey. Since then, the job has fallen to Koonz.

Once the eaglets reach their destination, they are placed in cages high above open water and fed a mainly fish diet. For the next few weeks they are watched to gauge when they are capable of flying. When they do gain that ability, the fledglings are released over water where men in motorboats are



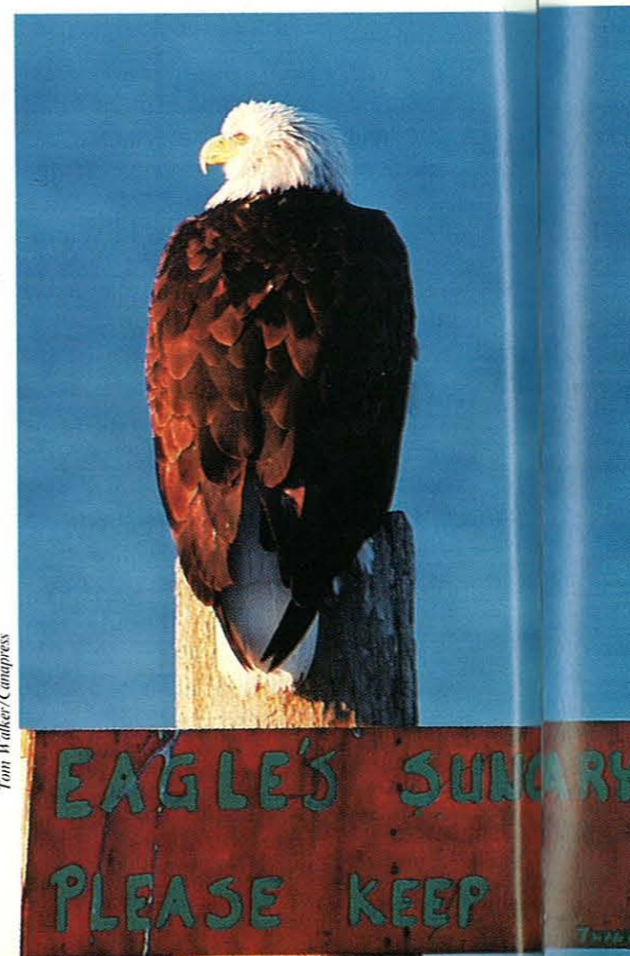
Jack Swedberg/Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife



both: Bill Byrne/Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife

Above: a Massachusetts wildlife official displays a wing marker sewn on prior to release. During its month-long confinement (above right), a young bird is routinely weighed on a set of scales disguised as a perch.

Below: an eaglet tests its wings for the first time during its release over Quabbin Reservoir, Mass. Adult plumage (below left) is not attained until the seventh year; this full-grown bird found a safe perch in Alaska.



Tom Walker/Compress





From Walker/Compuser

The bald eagle is more scavenger than predator. Groups of them gather to feed along the shores of large bodies of water. Their habit of eating spawning salmon and dead fish on beaches and riverbanks contributes to their intake of toxic substances.

ready to rescue the occasional bird whose first flight ends with a splash.

The eagles can return to the feeding station whenever they want but they will encounter less hospitality on the part of their human hosts. The birds must learn to fend for themselves for food and, so far, they are doing this very well.

Bald eagles relocated in Massachusetts, New Jersey and Pennsylvania are all doing well. Most eyes are set on next year when the 1983 birds will be old enough to breed. Many questions will be answered then: Will they breed? Will the eggs be normal? If healthy chicks do result, will they breed there?

In Saskatchewan, the eaglet-taking operation is substantially the same as in Manitoba. The eaglets come from northern Saskatchewan and the receiving state, Pennsylvania, gets 12 birds a year. Saskatchewan has a survey arrangement with Pennsylvania similar to the Manitoba–New Jersey one.

By far, most of the bald eagles in both provinces live in the Precambrian Shield terrain of the north. This has given the birds two important advantages: few humans and very little pesticide use.

There is a danger, of course, of the eagles taking in harmful chemicals when they migrate each fall to the United States. But their biggest pesticide enemy, DDT, has been banned for 15 years now and its residual effect in soil and water has practically disappeared.

In addition, it is now illegal to shoot eagles in the United States and Canada. Thus, with shooting and DDT banned in both countries, their future seems to be assured.

Bald eagles have a long history in the northern part of Western Canada. The explorer Samuel Hearne noted their presence in 1769–72 during his travels in what is now the Northwest Territories. David Thompson, in 1796, also

commented on the numbers of the birds, and other explorers have reported they were common from Lake Superior to Great Slave Lake.

In northwestern Ontario, bald eagles are thriving in the Atikokan–Kenora area. These eagles are also doing their part by providing young to be released in southern Ontario, which was as badly hit by DDT use as many American states.

If Charles Broley were alive he would be overjoyed by the improvement in eagle populations, both in the United States and in southern Ontario where he grew up. He would be happy, too, in the knowledge that a great deal of credit for the eagle restoration belongs to him. ♦

William Metcalfe, now retired and living in Winnipeg, is former managing editor of The Ottawa Journal and The Winnipeg Free Press.