

NOTES ON BALD EAGLES NESTING ON GARDINER'S ISLAND, EAST HAMPTON, NEW YORK

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While conducting the annual 2006 Christmas Bird Count on Gardiner's Island, Suffolk County, a section covered by the Montauk count circle, I observed from a distance through my spotting scope a new and very large nest. I could clearly see it from my high hill vantage point but had already walked past that area, missing it up close. I estimated it was about one half mile from my viewpoint. This nest was so large I toyed with the idea of it being an eagle's nest, and there were two immature eagles nearby over Bostwick Pond. They were locking talons together and twisting and turning down towards the pond, breaking apart before hitting the water. We usually do find eagles on the island during the count, so nothing was unusual in that respect. But I had covered this area of the ancient Bostwick Forest with my husband since 1994 and had never seen this nest before. Eagles hadn't nested on Long Island or Gardiner's Island in perhaps 50-60 years or so. As always, I was subject to a time limit on the beautiful island, and it was time to head back to board the boat that would bring us back to the "mainland" of East Hampton, at Three Mile Harbor. So, I resigned myself to trying to get to the nest on next year's count, if I would be so lucky to get over to Gardiner's Island again.

From 2007-2009 we were not allowed access to the island to count birds, so for three years the area was off limits. We finally returned in 2010 and once again I saw the large nest through my scope from the overlook of Lone Tree Hill. Too far to backtrack to it and catch the boat on time, I had to wait for yet another year, hoping to finally see it up close to confirm it as an eagle's nest.

In 2011, I finally examined the nest up close and it indeed was an eagle's nest. It was about three quarters of the way up in the crotch of an old oak tree, not very far from the open pond area and near the edge of the forest. It was the largest nest I had ever seen in my life. I was constantly harassed by a female adult bald eagle while I lingered in the area. A male, which I assumed to be her mate, was circling nearby but not as close as she was to me. She was very agitated with me so I quickly left the area, only to watch an immature Bald Eagle come in and perch off to the side of the nest. The adult female bird did not harass the immature, but she did continue to harass me, and I assumed it might have been her offspring from this year. She eventually left me alone as I made my way out among the giant forest trees. Her behavior convinced me she owned this nest, and was defending this active site even though it was long past breeding season for eagles. Hiking up to the hilltop vantage where I had initially observed the nest so many years before, I spotted another immature eagle over the pond area. It's hard to say if both immatures were her offspring but I'm sure the one near the nest was.

I certainly was glad after several years delay to finally have seen the nest up close. This would be Long Island's first Bald Eagle nest after so many years absent as a breeder. My old birding friends always said that if eagles did come back, they would nest on Gardiner's Island—and they were right.

Respecting the wishes of the Goulet family, who own Gardiner's Island, one must not take any photographs of anything on the island and before we hike its magnificent hills, fields, forests, swamps and marshes we must sign a legal paper stating so. It is only because of the generosity of the family that we get to go there at all on any given year, and a family member must be in attendance when the bird counters go there. I mentioned to Robert Goulet that he had an eagle's nest on his island, the first in literally over half a century.

In 2012 on the annual Christmas Count, Mr. Goulet said he had seen an eagle in the nest earlier in the year. When I showed my husband the nest this year we were "escorted" out of the area by two very agitated adult Bald Eagles. There was a huge amount of whitewash all over and underneath the nest on the forest floor and adjacent shrubs. This is convincing evidence of an active nest site, and one that is defended by the eagles year round. Of course, definitive proof would be finding the eagles incubating eggs in late winter or feeding chicks in May.

The former Director of Natural Resources in the Town of East Hampton, Larry Penny, has stated that for years now on the South Fork of Long Island many people from spring to summer see adult Bald Eagles going back and forth to Gardiner's Island. Geoff LeBaron, the North American Director of the Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Counts, had told me that the Connecticut River Valley eagles (just north of us) were doing very well, and their population had to expand sooner or later to new areas. He also stated that the Connecticut River Valley eagles defend their nest sites year round. They may wander about but they are not highly migratory like the more northern eagles are. Studies prove the fact that there are year round residents here who defend their nests against other eagles trying to take them over. Another reason they stay all year is that our waters stay relatively free from ice in the winter, providing the eagles with a food supply so they do not have to migrate.

Gardiner's Island is a perfect choice for them as it is remote, not open to the public, and very quiet. Historically the island was part of their Long Island nesting territory before they became endangered. The Gardiner's Island eagles defend their magnificent nest site year round and they prove that to me every year I go near their massive nest. Gardiner's Island once again has eagles nesting on it, after so long absent as a breeder, and it's been an honor to have discovered this and to report it to you.