Bald & Beautiful

Eagle Expo shows majesty of once-endangered species in area

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STEPHENSVILLE — Cindy and Rex Powell of Jena thought it would be wonderful if they got the chance Friday to see one or two bald eagles during the first Eagle Expo in lower St. Martin Parish.

By the time the sun dipped behind the cypress trees, they had seen about 20 of the once-endangered bald eagles, including a pair nesting atop a 150-foot-tall cypress tree.

"This far exceeded any of our expectations," she said.

About 50 people on four pontoon boats set sail from the Mosquito Bar in Stephensville at 2 p.m. Friday for the first Eagle Expo organized by the Cajun Coast Visitors and Convention Bureau.

The sold-out event, which continues today, was designed to raise awareness about the large bald eagle population in the area during the winter months.

Once on the endangered species list because of pesticides such as DDT, the bald eagle is regaining population.

"This is a route guaranteed for eagles," tour guide Ginger Rushing said as the lead pontoon left the dock.

It took only minutes for her promise to ring true as a bald eagle soared above the treeline and bayou, awing the expo participants who spent much of the day peering through binoculars.

Above, an American bald eagle sits in its nest Friday atop a cypress tree near Lake Verret, south of Morgan City.

At top, tour guide Ginger Rushing with Attakapas Adventures points out eagles and other birds as they appear.

ONLINE

See more images from the first Eagle Expo at www.theadvertiser.com, click on photo galleries link lars and camera lenses.

This eagle sported the white head and tail that identifies a mature bald eagle of about 3 to 5 years of age, said Rushing, who works as an ecological tour guide with Attakapas Adventures of Napoleonville.

A mature eagle can stand 3 feet tall and have a 6-foot to 8-foot wingspan.

LEARN MORE

- Cajun Coast Visitors and Convention Bureau, visit www.cajuncost.com
- For more on birding, visit www.birdlouisiana.com
- The Great Backyard Bird Count is Feb. 17-20. For more information, visit www.birdsource.org

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Bald

Wingspan. The females are larger than the males. At a point between Four Mile Bayou and Belle River, Rushing pointed to a tall tree with a nest on top. The signature white head of an adult bald eagle was barely visible above the rim of the deep nest.

Bald eagles winter in the Lake Verret area annually, arriving in November, Rushing said. Both the male and female build the nest, which can be six feet deep, 12 feet wide and weigh two tons. The female will lay one to three eggs before Christmas, and the male helps her feed and care for the young. By May or June, they head north, with the same pair returning the next winter to the same nest, which they add on to each year until it becomes too heavy for the tree to hold.

The tour continued into Lake Verret, where the expo participants, some of them bird-watchers and naturalists, got up-close looks at so-called snake birds or anhinga, blue herons, osprey, red-tailed hawks, falcons and brown and white pelicans. On the return trip, the group spotted an immature eagle without the telltale white head and tail.

“This is sort of my backyard,” said Rodd Cairns, a native of Pennsylvania who has been working in deep water oilfield construction in Louisiana for years, currently staying in Morgan City. “I’m sort of checking out my own backyard.”

Christine Frazier of Calhoun, who is a bird enthusiast, said she took the Eagle Expo tour to support Louisiana’s tourism industry after the devastation from hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

“A great Blue Heron flies alongside the tour boats of the Eagle Expo on Friday as they motor to Lake Verret.”

“A white pelican, the Louisiana state bird, flies over Lake Verret looking for a bite to eat late Friday south of Morgan City.”

Bald eagle facts

- Adults stand 30 to 36 inches tall.
- Adults have an average wingspan of 6 feet to 8 feet.
- A pair of eagles returns to the same nest every year.
- Bald eagles arrive in South Louisiana in November and leave in May or June.
- A bald eagle nest can measure 6 feet deep and weight two tons.

“I always thought it would be great fun,” said Sherry Free of Monroe, who graduated Friday from birding in her backyard to having spotted more than a dozen bald eagles.

The first Eagle Expo participants seemed pleased with the results of their first tour.

“This is a wonderful beginning,” said Mike Allen of Baton Rouge, who has been on an eagle tour in Arkansas that was 25 years old. “I think I saw more individual birds here.”