



MISSISSIPPI CURRENTS

Newsletter of the Quad City Audubon Society



UPCOMING EVENTS *All activities open to the public.*

Vol. 36, No 1

Spring 2025

Sunday, March 16th, 2025. Field Trip, Princeton Marsh. Meet at Lock and Dam 14, LeClaire, Iowa at 8:00am. We will look for waterfowl en route to Princeton Marsh. This is a short half day field trip and will involve some walking. For questions, contact qcaudubon@gmail.com.

Saturday, April 12th, 2025. Field Trip, Cone Marsh. Cone Marsh can be an exceptional wetland complex for waterfowl, shorebirds and more. This is a full day field trip with an estimated return around 2:00pm. Meet at the Marquette Street Boat Landing at 7:00am for carpooling. For questions contact qcaudubon@gmail.com

Saturday, April 26th, 2025. Stroll Thru Springtime, Black Hawk State Historic Site, Rock Island. Citizens to Preserve Black Hawk Park. Bird Walk 7:00-9:00am Program 9:00-10:00am Wildflower Walk 10:00-Noon.

Saturday, May 10th, 2025. Spring Bird Count. Contact Bill Bertrand at billandila@frontiernet.net to participate in Mercer County. Contact Tim Murphy at molmurphy53@gmail.com to participate in Rock Island County.



Great Blue Heron

Photo by Ken Carnes

Visit us on the web at
www.quadcityaudubon.org.

We're also on Facebook!



Bald Eagle

Photo by Jody Millar



Audubon

The Quad City Audubon Society is a Chapter of National Audubon Society

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Quad City
Audubon Society
P.O. Box 81

Bettendorf, IA 52722
www.quadcityaudubon.org

**Direct all general emails
to:**

qcaudubon@gmail.com

Summary of the Local Results from the 2025 National Midwinter Bald Eagle Count – Increased Ice Cover Equals More Wintering Eagles

By

Kelly J. McKay and Mark A. Roberts

This year the Illinois Audubon Society decided to discontinue their coordination of the Illinois State Midwinter Bald Eagle Count as part of the National Midwinter Bald Eagle Count in response to the increasingly onerous data entry demands placed on volunteer surveyors by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which compiles the National Count. However the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, which coordinates the Iowa State Midwinter Bald Eagle Count as part of the National Count, agreed to do the data entry for Iowa surveyors unable or unwilling to navigate through the Corps' data entry portal. Consequently, myself and Mark Roberts surveyed my normal 81.5 river miles locally along the Upper Mississippi River from Lock and Dam 13 in Clinton, Iowa to Keithsburg, Illinois, as well as 1.0 mile of the Rock River at the confluence with the Mississippi.

Unlike the last 2 years, the early winter this season was characterized by much colder temperatures throughout the region. The colder weather coupled with extremely low water levels in the river, produced considerable amounts of ice cover on the Mississippi River locally. In fact, ice cover throughout my seven survey routes ranged from a low of 19% to a high of 96%, and averaged 46% across all my routes. The Upper Mississippi River north of Clinton, Iowa was nearly completely ice covered during the survey period. As a result, there was a large influx of the northern Bald Eagle population into the local area, which experienced optimal amounts of ice cover and open water in early January.

We completed my survey routes over a three-day period (8-10 January). Overall, 2,656 eagles were recorded. This was the largest number of birds censused locally since the record year of 2014 (4,958 eagles)! Of these, 1,847 (69.5%) were located in Iowa, while the remaining 809 (30.5%) were observed in Illinois. For some good news, the proportion of young birds this year was substantial. Of the 2,656 eagles recorded, 1,597 (60.1%) were adults and 43 (1.6%) were unaged. The remaining 1,016 (38.3%) were immature birds. This robust proportion of young individuals suggests a growing population. Recently, there has been some discussions about discontinuing the National Midwinter Bald Eagle Count. We think this would be a mistake, since this count continues to be an important tool for the long-term monitoring of Bald Eagle populations across the United States.

Potential Problems Persist Regarding the Local Wintering Bald Eagle Population

By

Kelly J. McKay

Now for some potentially troubling news. The number of eagles wintering locally has declined considerably since the early 2000s. For example, from 2000-2009 the seven local routes that I conduct as part of the National Midwinter Bald Eagle Count averaged 2,439 eagles/year. This average declined to 1,420 eagles/year between 2010-2019. From 2020-2025, the average number of local wintering birds (1,467 eagles/year) continues to be substantially lower. So, although Bald Eagle populations appear to be increasing overall, the number of birds wintering locally seems to be significantly lower. This is especially the case in the Quad Cities metropolitan area. Over the last couple of decades the largest concentrations of wintering eagles are typically found downstream of Lock and Dam 15, particularly in the Milan Bottoms/Credit Island/Horse Island Complex, where substantial amounts of tree-lined shoreline foraging-perch habitat still exists. This area includes only 38% of the river miles surveyed in the Quad Cities metro area (i.e., between Lock and Dam 14 and Utah Avenue) and yet it accounted for 67% of the eagles recorded in the Quad Cities this year. The remaining 62% of the river miles surveyed in the Quad Cities metro area this year contained only 33% of the wintering eagles.

As I have repeatedly mentioned in previous *Mississippi Currents* articles, an unknown amount of this significant reduction in locally wintering eagles can possibly be attributed to changing eagle usage of the landscape, rather than an actual decline in the overall population. I am referring to a trend which has been occurring throughout the Midwest for nearly two decades – where substantial numbers of Bald Eagles appear to be wintering further inland away from the Mississippi River. These birds have been undoubtedly utilizing various inland food resources (e.g. winter or hunter-killed deer, gut piles from the hunting season, road-kills, and dead wildlife/livestock). These alternative food resources are extremely risky for Bald Eagles for a number of reasons which include, but are not limited to, increasing collision rates with vehicles, increasing amounts of lead poisoning, as well as the elevated potential for exposure to various harmful agricultural chemicals used in livestock operations (e.g., hormones, antibiotics, medications, ect.). If an increasing number of wintering Bald Eagles are no longer concentrating along the major riverways of the Midwest, survey routes which predominately census along these rivers will be encountering an overall smaller proportion of the birds actually present within the region. This could negatively impact our ability to accurately monitor regional Bald Eagle population trends. The obvious question is “why are more eagles wintering away from rivers?”

Although based only on anecdotal information, the answer to this question may be linked to an apparent significant reduction of “winter-killed” Gizzard Shad, which is the primary food resource for wintering Bald Eagles on the Mississippi River. Over the same period that we have observed more eagles using inland areas, myself and other eagle researchers have noted a substantial decline in the apparent amount of “winter-killed” Gizzard Shad within the Mississippi River as well as some of its tributaries. Historically, enormous numbers of this oxygen-sensitive fish were “winter-killed” each year as a result of fluctuating dissolved oxygen levels in the river which is largely influenced by variations in ice cover. This abundance of “winter-killed” shad, provides a reliable and readily available food resource which has supported the large Midwestern wintering population of Bald Eagles for more than a century. If the abundance of this food resource is declining it may be creating food shortages, of an unknown magnitude,

Mission Statement

The Quad City Audubon Society is dedicated to the enjoyment of birds; a better understanding of the natural world; stewardship of natural areas and habitats; fellowship; improvement of community awareness of environmental issues; and education of youth for the benefit of future generations.

Thank you to those who contributed to this issue of *Mississippi Currents*.

The next deadline is May 25th, 2025. Submissions are gladly accepted.

Send to: Jason Monson,
(309) 221-1177, jmonson75@hotmail.com

Visit us online at: www.quadcityaudubon.org.

Potential Problems Persist Regarding the Local Wintering Bald Eagle Population

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for eagles on the river. This could explain why more eagles are moving inland during the winter months. If something is reducing shad populations on the Upper Mississippi River, this could certainly begin to negatively impact Bald Eagle populations in the Midwest, by reducing winter survival rates.

However, within the immediate Quad Cities metropolitan area, I believe there may actually be fewer eagles wintering due to the continuing loss of shoreline foraging-perch habitat. Since I began surveying wintering Bald Eagles locally with Elton Fawks back in the early 1980s, the Quad Cities has lost a substantial amount of this critically important habitat to extensive commercial, industrial, residential, and recreational development. Now, the local night-roosting sites are under attack! A couple of years ago, the Elton Fawks Bald Eagle Refuge was threatened by the proposed development of hiking trails by the Illinois DNR. Luckily, that plan was abandoned. Last year, the night roost on Arsenal Island was lost when the Army cut down all the trees. This year, the City of Rock Island along with a private developer have proposed a commercial development project immediately adjacent to the largest documented night roost on the Mississippi River in Milan Bottoms! This will certainly jeopardize the continued viability of this major night roosting location. The Quad Cities community loves its wintering Bald Eagle population. The as yet unanswered question is, do we love it enough to protect and conserve the habitats that are critically important and necessary to wintering Bald Eagles?

Once again, I want to strongly urge state and federal resource agencies to start researching and addressing this complicated and potentially serious issue involving wintering Bald Eagle populations and distribution, as well as the availability of Gizzard Shad, throughout the Midwestern landscape. I also want to appeal to everyone locally to get involved with the issue of the potentially devastating development being proposed for the Milan Bottoms area. This critically important communal night roost often plays host to 600-800 eagles per night! Although this incredible and resilient species survived the dark days of the DDT era and has exhibited a strong recovery, other potentially serious problems and threats still persist. If we want the Quad Cities to continue to be the winter home for large numbers of Bald Eagles, we need to ensure the availability of their vitally important wintering habitats! For more information regarding the Milan Bottoms issue, feel free to give me a call at (309) 235-4661.

Red Alert Warning – An Imminent and Potentially Catastrophic Threat to Milan Bottoms

By

Kelly J. McKay and Jason L. Monson

Milan Bottoms is certainly one of the best, if not the best, natural areas remaining in the Quad Cities vicinity. Based on the results of various avian point count surveys conducted here, as well as Red-shouldered Hawk research over many years, Milan Bottoms is known to host one of the richest avian communities on the Upper Mississippi River System. I was contracted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to conduct a six-year intensive Bald Eagle communal night roost survey project here over 6 winters from 2005-2011. During this project, we were able to demonstrate that Milan Bottoms serves as the largest documented communal night roost for wintering Bald Eagles on the Mississippi River, if not the entire lower 48 states! During some winters, this site provides critically important night roosting habitat for as many as 600-800 eagles per night! Milan Bottoms is vitally important to our local and regional wintering Bald Eagle population. We also know that several other state and federally listed threatened or endangered species or species of special concern are also undoubtedly found in Milan Bottoms (e.g., Copperbelly Water Snake, Blanding's Turtle, Northern Long-eared Bat, and Indiana Bat).

We were shocked to hear last fall that the city of Rock Island, Illinois was planning to sell one of its parcels in the upstream eastern corner of Milan Bottoms at the junction of I280 and Highway 92 (3809 60 Ave. West) to A Hana Illowa LLC (a Stern Beverage-owned company), who was planning a major commercial development project at the 10-acre site. The proposed development, as we understand it presently, will consist of a marijuana dispensary/lounge/grow facility as well as a fairly large truck stop and gas station complex. This proposed development will be immediately adjacent to the most important high use area for night roosting Bald Eagles in Milan Bottoms! We are deeply concerned, given that all research indicates communal night roosting eagles are extremely intolerant of nearby human activity and disturbances. We believe this development will severely impact the Milan Bottoms night roost and put into jeopardy the future viability of this site as one of the most important night roosting areas for Bald Eagles on the Mississippi River. In fact, we fear that with the constant bright lights and truck noise all night long Milan Bottoms may be largely abandoned by night roosting eagles! This doesn't even take into account the potential negative impacts to the entire Milan Bottoms Complex resulting from environmental contamination and runoff. As I stated in the previous article, the people of the Quad Cities love their wintering Bald Eagles, but do we care enough to protect the few critical pieces of habitat that are vital to the survival of our wintering eagle population?

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Red Alert Warning – An Imminent and Potentially Catastrophic Threat to Milan Bottoms

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On 26 January, the Rock Island City Council voted unanimously to proceed with backing the project and appear to be moving forward rapidly. Consequently, our time for organizing opposition is limited. A group of local and regional environmentalists, biologists, and conservation organizations have formed a coalition to oppose this particular development. The group met at Nahant Marsh Education Center on 22 January and 5 February to discuss a strategy and plan our opposition to this project. The group decided to draft a general letter of concern to the Rock Island City Council, stating our concerns regarding this proposed development. The QCAS was one of the signatories on the letter. We are now appealing to all QCAS members, especially those that are residents of Rock Island, to immediately write letters of concern or opposition and send it to each of the city council members as well as the mayor (see mailing and email addresses below). Also, we are hoping you will follow up your letter with one or more phone calls to the mayor's office at city hall and each of the city council members voicing your concerns regarding the proposed development (see phone number below). Finally, the city council will hold a public hearing of the community development commission regarding the needed TIF expansion for this development on Monday 17 March at Rock Island City Hall at 5:30 PM. We would like to have as many people as possible attend this public hearing and voice their concerns about this proposed development. It is the eleventh hour and our backs are against the wall. The very fate of Milan Bottoms, as well as one of the most important Bald Eagle use areas in the country hangs in the balance. We make this plea to everyone, to stand up and defend this natural jewel of the Quad Cities – Milan Bottoms!

City Council Contact Information

Mayor Mike Thoms
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: rimayor@rigov.org
Phone: (W) 309-732-2012
(C) 309-644-1570

First Ward Alderman Moses Robinson, Jr.
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: robinson.moses@rigov.org
Phone: (C) 309-737-1081

Second Ward Alderman Randy Hurt
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: hurt.randall@rigov.org
Phone: (C) 309-737-3178

Third Ward Alderman Randy Tweet
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: tweet.randall@rigov.org
Phone: (C) 309-373-9323

Fourth Ward Alderwoman Jenni Swanson
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: swanson.jenni@rigov.org
Phone: (C) 309-781-4877

Fifth Ward Alderman Dylan Parker
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: parker.dylan@rigov.org
Phone: (C) 563-940-6073

Sixth Ward Alderman Mark Poulos
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: poulos.mark@rigov.org
Phone: (C) 309-737-9883

Seventh Ward Alderman Bill Healy
1528 Third Avenue
Rock Island, IL 61201
email: healy.bill@rigov.org
Phone: (C) 309-539-4181

Make your voice heard regarding the potential development at Milan Bottoms by signing up for public comment at the hearing at Rock Island City Hall, Monday, March 17th, 2025 at 5:30 p.m.

Public Comment is held at the beginning of City Council meetings after the Moment of Silence. The allotted time for Public Comment is thirty (30) minutes. If additional time is needed, Public Comment will be extended at the end of the meeting for additional speakers.

Each speaker will have five (5) minutes to address Council and only one opportunity to speak. Speakers must sign up on the sign-in sheet prior to the meeting (at the back of Council Chambers).

When your name is called, go to the podium at the front and state your name for the record. Address your comments to Council as a whole; not to individual members.

Be concise with your comments. You have a limit of five (5) minutes.

Be civil and courteous in your comments. Profanity will not be tolerated.

Speakers may not use Public Comment to harass Council or engage in disturbing behavior. Public Comment is not for asking questions of Council or engaging in a dialogue or debate.

(Conversations with Council members should be arranged for outside of Council meetings.) Disturbances will not be tolerated and may be cause for removal.

You can also help by signing our petition at change.org/p/protect-milan-bottoms-the-quad-cities-largest-intact-natural-area

You can learn so much more at the Save Milan Bottoms Facebook Page: <https://www.facebook.com/share/18fkLzauKD/>