

Starving bald eagles so weak they fall from sky

Poor chum salmon runs leave birds without any food

BY JUDITH LAVOIE, TIMESCOLONIST.COM FEBRUARY 22, 2011



Wildlife care technician Reg Westcott examines a bald eagle that had been taken to the Mountaineer centre.

Photograph by: ., MOUNTAINAIRE AVIAN RESCUE SOCIETY

Starving bald eagles are falling out of the sky in the Comox Valley, a wildlife expert says.

Maj Birch, manager of the Mountaineer Avian Rescue Society, is caring for seven eagles.

Several others had died before they could be helped, she said.

"This is the most we have ever had," Birch said. "Many of them are downed before they are brought in. They are on the ground and they're too weak to fly away.

"Some of them are actually falling out of the sky. One of them slid off a roof yesterday."

This year, about 20 birds have been cared for by the centre.

Most have had to be fed by tube because they are too debilitated to eat solid food, Birch said.

Feathers hide many problems, so the poor condition of the birds is often not known until they arrive at the centre and are found to be loaded with parasites, with no body fat, she said.

The cause of the starvation appears to be poor chum salmon runs both around the Comox Valley and on the mainland, Birch said.

"Bald eagles follow the food sources ... Chum are rich in oil and fat and they are in the rivers in late fall and early winter, so it sustains the eagles through the winter months," she said.

"The eagles didn't get the food they needed in January."

Now the eagles are waiting around the Comox Valley for the herring spawn in early March, said Birch, who hopes the run will not come too late for many of the birds.

"By then, the birds could be so debilitated they may not have the energy to hunt," she said.

Eagles face challenges in other areas because of pollution, development and overfishing, Birch said.

"If you go to the landfill, you see hundreds of them right now and they're not really garbage-eaters," she said.

Robin Campbell, of North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre in Errington, which is caring for nine bald eagles, said most became ill after eating at dumps in the Comox Valley and Campbell River.

"If they can't find carrion, they go to the dump, and the problem with the dump up there is you get a lot of poisoning," he said.

No one at Comox Valley Regional District was available to talk about the landfill Tuesday.

Campbell said the poor chum run is a problem for eagles — although the number at the recovery centre is not unusual — but it was compounded by heavy rains that washed the dead fish out to sea.

Intensive work involved in rehabilitating eagles is expensive and, like many other animal rehabilitation centres — including the North Island Wildlife Recovery Centre — MARS no longer receives provincial gaming grants, meaning the entire \$100,000 budget has to be raised through donations.

The annual Bald Eagle Festival will be held at the Maritime Heritage Centre in Campbell River on Saturday.

Although the festival's main aim is education, it is hoped that it will also raise funds to help with eagle care, Birch said.

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