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## Local and National News - Kootenai County, Idaho

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### Symbol of America

Bald eagles are back for the watching

As the sun fades away on a freezing, windy afternoon, a lone eagle circles over the frigid waters of Beauty Bay.

Soon, two more appear, gradually dropping closer to the lake as they seek what they came for.

Then a fourth joins in and together they rise, circling together, rising and swooping over wind-blown Lake Coeur d'Alene, scouring the surface for signs of their prey.

Off a bit, another pair engages in a game of pursuit, seemingly killing time until dinner is served.

As consistent as the calendar, bald eagles have returned on schedule to Wolf Lodge Bay on Lake Coeur d'Alene. The annual migration of these magnificent birds has begun and the numbers of our national symbol available here for our viewing enjoyment grow every day. As of last Saturday, there were about 35 eagles counted in the combined Wolf Lodge and Beauty Bay areas.

The eagles are here to take advantage of easy pickings, as the mature kokanee salmon in Lake Coeur d'Alene have completed their life cycle and are dying after spawning on the submerged gravels in Wolf Lodge Bay.

Kokanee were introduced to the lake in 1937 and discovered by the eagles on their normal southward migration in search of open waters and available food. Once the kokanee supply dwindles, the eagles will continue to the Klamath Basin of Oregon/California, or into southern Idaho and Utah.

Until then, enjoy.

"Bring your Thermos full of hot chocolate and make a day of viewing a magnificent bird and national symbol ... a sight that few in the country have an opportunity to view at such a close range," said Phil Cooper wildlife conservation educator in the Panhandle Region.

Strength and freedom

The bald eagle is probably the most widely recognized symbol in the United States. It first appeared on a coin in 1776 and officially became the national symbol in 1782. Associated with strength and freedom, the bald eagle is unique to North America. Concentrations are found today in the northwestern U.S., Alaska, western Canada, the Great Lakes, the Mississippi River and the Atlantic Coast of the U.S. When the first Europeans arrived in North America, there were 25,000 nesting pairs of bald eagles.

While most today admire and appreciate the bald eagle, it hasn't always been so. From 1917 until 1952, more than 100,000 bald eagles were shot in Alaska (prior to statehood) under the belief they were competitors with humans for salmon. Other human actions such as development in critical habitats and pesticide use inadvertently had negative effects upon eagles. By 1970, there were only 1,500 breeding pairs remaining.

The Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940 prohibited killing of eagles and first protected the species' habitat. In 1978, the Endangered Species Act listed bald eagles as "endangered" in 43 states and "threatened" in five states providing further protection.

Reduced direct killing of eagles and the banning of certain pesticides have enabled eagles to exhibit dramatic recovery. In



JEROME A. POLLOS/Press

A bald eagle flies back to its nest with a small animal held tightly in its talons over Beauty Bay on Lake Coeur d'Alene.

Idaho, the number of bald eagle nests has grown from 11 in 1979 to well over 100 today. There are about 45 pairs that nest in the Panhandle region of Idaho.

#### Eagle facts

The bald eagle has a wingspan up to seven feet. Males weigh 8-10 pounds; females are larger at 10-14 pounds. Their white heads and chocolate brown/black bodies of adult bald eagles make it easy to recognize them instantly. Young birds have a brown head until maturity at age 4-5. Many immature bald eagles are mistaken for golden eagles.

Fish, whether dead or alive, are the preferred fare of bald eagles. Waterfowl, small mammals, winter or road killed deer are also utilized when available.

As with all living things, food, water, shelter and space are the essential elements of the habitat of an eagle. If any one of these is missing or unavailable, eagles will not be present. When areas north of us freeze making fish unavailable, the eagles head our way. Also necessary are suitable large trees used as perching sites for foraging and resting. They require variable amounts of security from disturbance. Some become tolerant of human presence, others are easily disturbed.

Bald eagle nests are among the largest in the world. A pair of eagles, mated for life, will add material to their nest annually. Nests can reach up to 8 feet across and 10 feet deep. One nest on Lake Erie in Ohio weighed several tons when it fell from a tree in a windstorm.

Mature eagles normally lay two eggs, sometimes three, rarely four. Eggs are laid in late February or early March and hatch following 35 days of incubation by both male and female adults. One successfully fledged bird per nest per year is the norm, because often one nestling will out-compete another for food and the weaker will not survive. However, on occasion more than one bird successfully leaves the nest and takes flight.

#### Where to watch

To observe eagles on Lake Coeur d'Alene, travel to Higgens Point or Mineral Ridge on Wolf Lodge Bay. Higgens point is probably the safest place to view from, as the Mineral Ridge side of the bay has a very limited number of pullouts and there are numerous blind corners.

To avoid disturbing the birds, please use the following precautions. Use binoculars or spotting scopes so you may view details without the need to be close. Vehicles disturb eagles less than walking people do, so parking safely off the road and viewing with binoculars is a good method. Watch the bird's body language. If you are too close, it will appear uneasy. Remain quiet and move slowly. It is illegal and unsafe to stop on a public roadway, so please use turnouts or parking lots to view eagles.

The daily life of an eagle in Wolf Lodge includes a dawn flight from a nightly roost over a mile away. Feeding activity begins upon arrival at the lake and continues throughout the early morning. Eagles will locate a fish from the air or a perch, glide over the water and grab the fish with its sharp talons. Returning to a feeding perch in a tree, the eagle tears pieces off with its beak to eat the fish. Feeding slows at mid-day, then resumes late afternoon before the flight back to the roost.

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