

Our eagle eyes are the BEST

Dr. Lena C. Larsson, Executive Director, Sutton Avian Research Center

As you may already know, the Sutton Avian Research Center is a non-profit organization here in Bartlesville that brought eggs from Florida, incubated, hatched, raised and released bald eagles from 1985–1992. There were no known eagle nests in Oklahoma when the program started, and the goal was to have at least 10 nesting pairs in the state. Fast forward 30+ years, and we can say that the program worked even better than expected! The goal of ten nests was reached in 1993, and the numbers have been going up since. The southern bald eagle was de-listed in 2007, and is no longer considered an endangered species. The post-delisting monitoring plan includes collecting data on occupied nests over a 20-year period. If declines are detected, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will investigate causes and consider necessary actions. Eagles are still protected through the Migratory Bird Treaty Act as well as the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. It is illegal to disturb eagles or their nests, nor is it allowed to possess any parts, including feathers, unless you have a special permit.

The Sutton Center continues to monitor the Oklahoma bald eagle population. We currently do not have funding for this work, so we are very much relying on volunteers to help us with this part of our mission. They are the BEST – the Bald Eagle Survey Team! The BEST members visit known eagle nest territories at least three times each breeding season. First we confirm if the eagles are occupying their old territory, and whether they are using the same nest as the previous season. Eagles sometimes maintain alternate nests, and can switch among seasons. The second visit is to determine if the eagles are tending to eggs or young. We usually see an adult sitting in the nest, which means that they are either incubating eggs or keeping chicks warm. If our timing is right, and we have a good view, we get to see chicks moving around in the nest or the adults feeding them. We also try to count the number of eaglets. The third visit is to confirm and count how many chicks the eagle pair has raised before they fledge. Even though the eagles become as large as the adults before fledging, observations can be tricky since the leaves often obscure the nests later in the spring.

The BEST volunteers need a mode of travel, binoculars, patience, and preferentially computer access. The nest record form can be filled out by hand, but online maps are very helpful. The public can report bald eagle nests on Sutton Center's website, allowing us to follow up with nest checks. The nest locations are not made public, both to protect the eagles and the landowners' privacy. A BEST workshop in late fall covers the laws and regulations, importance of not disturbing the eagles, general eagle information, and who will monitor which nests. Contact us if you want to become one of the BEST!



Bald Eagle Survey Team members at Sutton Center's workshop December 2018 (photo by Dan Reinking).



Bald Eagle Survey Team members observing a flying bald eagle (photo by Cheryl Cavert).



Adult in nest with fledging size juvenile bald eagle (photo by Patty Smith-Clark).