

Treasuring the Bald Eagle as an 'FOY' by Coralee Bodeker

I began my New Year birding at Red Fox Wildlife Management Area, a parcel of public land located in north-central Benton County and managed by the DNR. The first half of my hike yielded no birds—not in the field plots, not in the creek, not in the



woods. Nothing moved. This was not exactly how I imagined beginning my 2016 birding list. It wasn't until I reached the Cedar River that I spotted something, five Bald Eagles riding the air currents high overhead. I have always enjoyed watching Bald Eagles glide majestically, wings spread like fingers, diving out of the sky to catch fish. I don't think I've met anyone who doesn't like this bird species. The group I spotted in Red Fox contained three first-year juveniles and two adults. Juvenile Bald Eagles usually don't display adult plumage for about four years; first-years (born the previous spring) are dark brown all over with just a hint of mottling. Then, for the next few years, their plumage becomes even more mottled with obvious spots of black and white. I was especially thrilled to see this group because hardly one mile upstream is a Bald Eagle nest that I monitor. Every year the DNR uses trained volunteers to monitor hundreds of raptor nests in Iowa. When I began monitoring last year there were no recorded Bald Eagle nests in Benton County, one of only a few of Iowa's 99

counties not represented in the Bird Nest Monitoring Program. I managed to find and map two nests as part of my training in the spring of 2015. By summer's end, I knew my nest near Red Fox had been successful as I had observed fledglings on the nest, but I could never determine the actual number of chicks fledged—I only ever saw one juvenile at a time. It is my hope that the three juveniles I spotted on New Year's Day are from one or both of my nests and are now hanging out in their nesting territories along with their parents. My first bird of the year (FOY) may not have been a rarity or even a "lifer" for me (a bird I've never seen before), but not so very long ago, seeing five bald eagles (or even one!) was an amazing find as the overall population of eagles in North America had plummeted. Today, Iowa alone has hundreds of monitored eagle nests and many more unmonitored as well. It's remarkable, actually, how we are now able to take a Bald Eagle sighting for granted.



I did not locate any other species of bird in Red Fox that day, but I'm counting myself lucky five times over anyway.

'A Prairie Girl's Notebook' is inspired by 'A Naturalist's Notebook' penned by John Schmitt & found in the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Living Bird journal.