

WC eaglets 6-09

*Stewards of the environment, and eaglets*

# **Bald eagles make their home in midst of Aquarion reservoir**

*By Brian Roach*

When Larry Fischer, an ornithologist from Newtown, Connecticut, spotted an adult bald eagle collecting dry grass at the edge of one of Aquarion Water Company's reservoirs in Fairfield County, he knew a nest had to be nearby. That meant he was about to make a rare discovery, since there was no previous record of bald eagles nesting on Aquarion property previously, and a statewide survey in 2007 found only 15 nests in all of Connecticut.

The bald eagle is our national bird, a symbol of the country's strength. Yet, it was nearly extinct by 1960. According to the National Audubon Society's website, the decline occurred mainly because of the widespread use of pesticides such as DDT, which "accumulated in fish, a staple of the eagle's diet. The pesticides gradually poisoned females, causing them to produce thinly-shelled eggs that broke easily, preventing the embryos from growing. Years of hunting, accidental poisoning and habitat loss took an additional toll."

Today, though bald eagles are still listed as a protected species, their population is increasing. Eagle sightings are now fairly commonplace in Connecticut, but eagles nesting in the state are still a rarity.

Fischer, who is president of the Western Connecticut Bird Club, conducts research on the migration and behavior patterns of hawks and owls on several Aquarion properties in Fairfield County under permits issued by Aquarion, the Connecticut Department of Environmental Protection (CT DEP), and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. After Fischer saw the eagle during one of his excursions, he followed it to determine the location of its nest. Then he alerted the CT DEP and Aquarion.

On May 11, Gary Haines and Brian Roach of Aquarion's Department of Watershed and Environmental Management assisted wildlife biologist Julie Victoria of the CT DEP

and her team from the Connecticut Bald Eagle Study Group in capturing and banding the eaglets. Sally Harold, director of The Nature Conservancy's Saugatuck River Watershed Partnership, accompanied the eagle-banding team as its photographer.

The lightweight metal bands, which are placed on eaglets' legs before they leave the nest, allow scientists to learn more about the range and movements of individual birds. For example, leg bands on the first adult bald eagles to nest in Connecticut after their return from near-extinction showed that those birds had moved into the state from an eagle reintroduction project in Massachusetts.

Despite their fierce appearance, bald eagles are actually very shy when it comes to people. The Aquarion nest, located nearly 90 feet above the ground in a large tree on an island in the middle of the reservoir, was no exception to the rule that bald eagles tend to nest only in remote and inaccessible locations well away from human contact. Because the nest was on an island, Gary transported the eagle-banding team to the site by boat.

Once on the island, Fischer climbed the giant pine tree that held the nest, captured the two 7-pound eaglets in it, and carefully lowered each of them in a large canvas sack down to the banding team waiting below. The team, led by Ms. Victoria and assisted by Mike O'Leary and Don Hopkins of the Bald Eagle Study Group, weighed and measured the eaglets to estimate their age and sex, secured the leg bands, and sent them back up in their canvas bag "elevator" to Fischer, who was waiting in the tree top to return them unharmed to their nest.

A number of organizations conduct wildlife research on lands Aquarion owns, and also on lands it manages cooperatively with The Nature Conservancy and the CT DEP. These research groups come from the CT DEP, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's U.S. Forest Service, the Connecticut Amphibian Monitoring Project, Sacred Heart University and Fairfield University.

Access to Aquarion properties for research purposes is conducted within strict guidelines, however, and can only be performed under permits issued by Aquarion's Department of Watershed and Environmental Management. Unauthorized entry onto Aquarion properties could disrupt sensitive wildlife research or unnecessarily disturb endangered species such as the bald eagle, and therefore it is prohibited.