

# The Making of a Bald Eagle Nest

Story by Kathleen Clark and Larry Niles • Photos by Sherry Meyer



This tree (left), which held a bald eagle nest in Belleplain State Forest since 1991, died. The nest, weighing several hundred pounds, fell during a late May storm.

Remains of the nest were found on the ground and one nestling was found nearby. The other two nestlings, observed weeks before, could not be found. The remaining eaglet (above), about nine weeks old, was thin but healthy.

Bald eagles are riding the crest of a comeback in New Jersey. Decimated by the effects of DDT used in the 1950s and 1960s, their population was down to only one nesting pair by 1970. The single pair continued to fail to produce young each year until 1982, when biologists in the state's Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP) began to artificially incubate the eagle eggs and return young chicks to the nest for parental care. Thanks to their efforts, the single nest, in Bear Swamp Natural Area, fledged one or two young each year between 1982 and 1988.

But eagle production from one nest would take years to restore the state's population so, in 1983, the ENSP initiated an intensive restoration project. Young eaglets were obtained from natural nests in Manitoba, Canada, where bald eagle populations are stable. They were brought into the heart of historic eagle habitat in Cumberland County, where they were held in cages on a hacking tower facing the marsh and fed by biologists who were careful not to be seen by the eagles. The cages were opened when the eaglets were eleven weeks old and ready to take their first flight. Under this method, called

hacking, sixty young eagles were released from 1983 to 1990. They formed the basis for 1997's New Jersey eagle population of 14 pairs.

While there are many wild places remaining, New Jersey's eagles often encounter the effects of living in the most densely populated state. Bald eagles require large areas in which to nest, hunt and live, and tend to have low tolerance for human intrusion near them or their nests. Since eagles build their nests and lay eggs in January and February, at times they choose sites that look good in winter, but are busy "people" places in spring and summer. Often, young eagles building their first nest will choose such a location, then abandon the nest due to human intrusion nearby.

One solution has been to give the eagles a hint of where they might find a better spot by building eagle nests to encourage nesting in more appropriate locations. One reason this works is that the eagles would rather take up residence in a pre-constructed nest than build their own from scratch. Once eagles begin nesting and are successful, however, they are reluctant to move.

In 1990, eagles at Union Lake had built a nest in a sub-optimal location but had not

The ground crew (below, top) cuts the framing lumber.

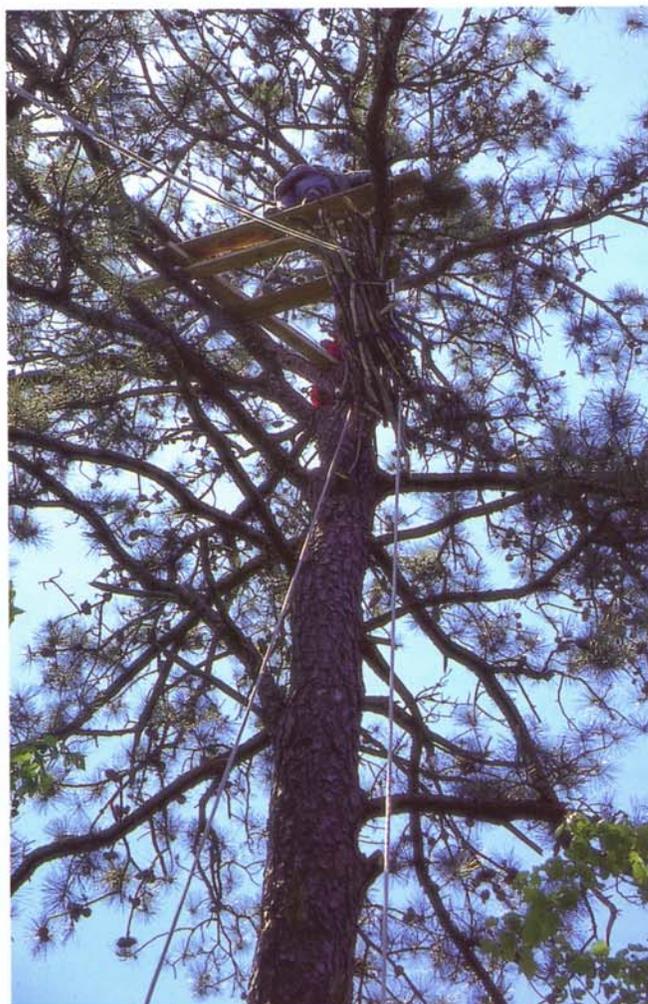
A framing piece (below, bottom) will be raised up into the canopy using ropes and pulleys.



A bird's eye view of the frame under construction. (right)

The sticks are bundled and will be raised up to Niles (below, left).

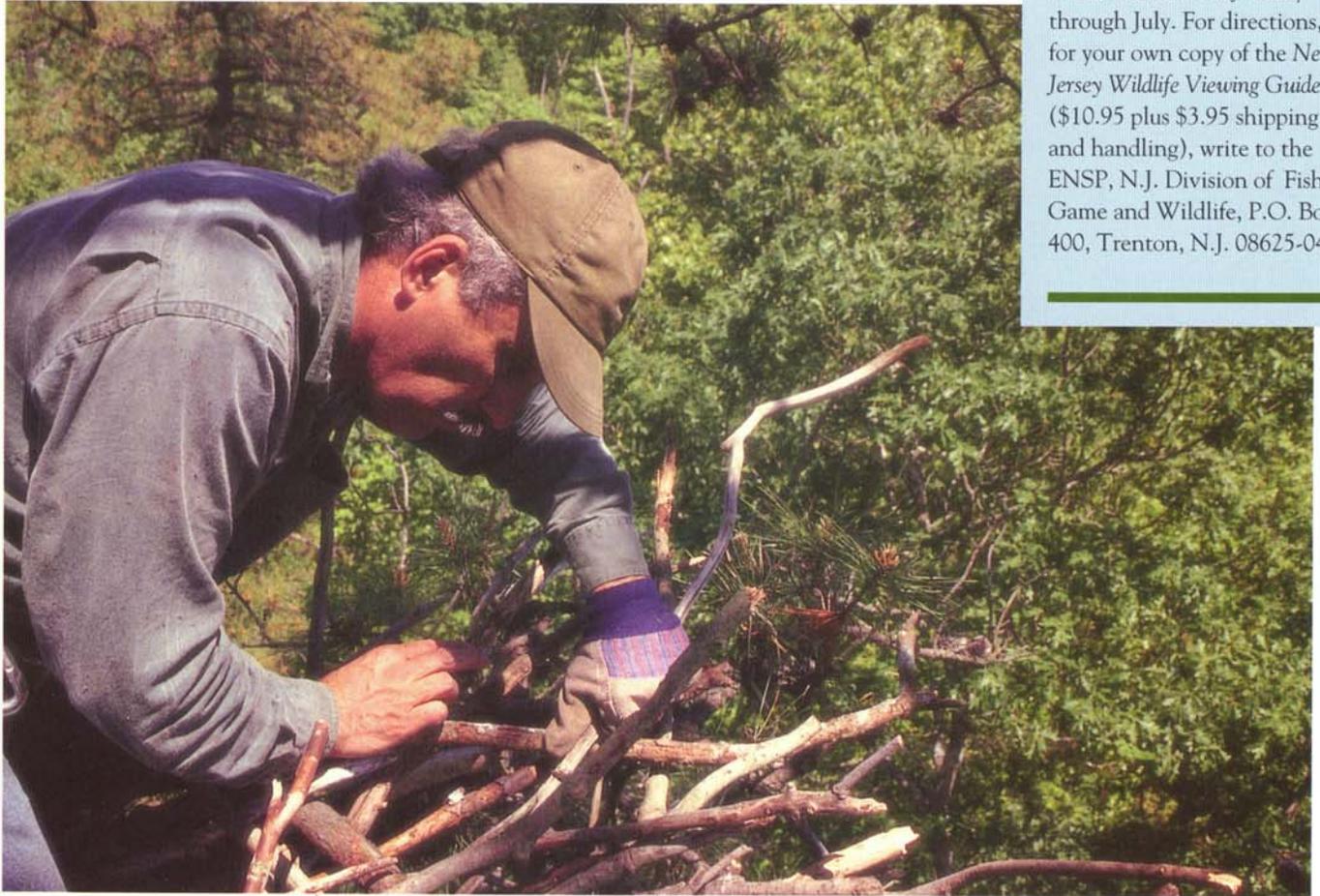
The bundled sticks have almost reached the frame, where they will be woven in by Niles (below, right).



Niles weaves the sticks into the frame, the screen and the limbs of the tree.

## Eyeing the Eagles

A safe viewing area has been established at the Stow Creek nest in Canton, on the border of Salem and Cumberland counties. Eagles are active at the nest area from January through July. For directions, or for your own copy of the *New Jersey Wildlife Viewing Guide* (\$10.95 plus \$3.95 shipping and handling), write to the ENSP, N.J. Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife, P.O. Box 400, Trenton, N.J. 08625-0400.



actually laid eggs. Biologists built a nest within 500 yards, away from the disturbance of the shoreline and into the forest. The eagles accepted the new nest immediately and began building it up before the new nesting season.

The first time New Jersey biologists built an eagle nest was in 1987— in Bear Swamp Natural Area, the site of the original remaining

nest. The nest tree, a huge pond pine, had died years before and would not support the nest any longer. Choosing an adjacent pine of similar size and height, ENSP biologists spent a December day building a stick nest three feet deep by four feet wide. Just a week later, the eagle pair was observed at the new nest, adding material to prepare for nesting.

The success of that first nest supported the belief that new nests should be built close to old nests. New nests “work” — get used by eagles — when they are less than 300 yards from existing nests, and perhaps when eagles have a need to move away from disturbance or into forest that may be more secure.

Building nests for bald eagles has become an impor-

tant tool for managing and maintaining eagles in New Jersey. The state's eagle population continues to grow, and each nest requires an investment of protection and concern by landowners and communities. When eagles nest in a favorable place, biologists work to maintain their habitat and make the nest area secure. Part of that work may in-

The grounded eaglet was finally placed into his new home. The adults were observed on the nest in the weeks afterward, and the nestling fledged successfully about a month later. The new nest will be there to support nesting eagles for many years to come.



clude replacing a nest now and then. Bald eagles represent wilderness, and they need wild places, free from excessive disturbance, where they can nest, hunt and raise young. Eagles also need the protection that people offer: keeping nest areas secure, protecting wetlands, and keeping their distance when they watch eagles.

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## Your Help Can Make the Difference

The Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP) works to protect and enhance the state's bald eagle population, as well as 61 other state endangered and threatened species. The ENSP receives no state funds, and relies on donations made through the State Income Tax "Check-Off for Wildlife"

and "Conserve Wildlife" license plates. For the ENSP's free quarterly newsletter, *Conserve Wildlife*, please write to: *Conserve Wildlife Newsletter*, P.O. Box 400, Trenton, N.J. 08625-0400.

## Nest-Building Efforts by ENSP Biologists

| Year | Site                       | Circumstances  | Result   |
|------|----------------------------|--|----------|
| 1986 | Bear Swamp Natural Area    | Original nest tree died. New nest built in adjacent "super canopy" pine within 200 yards   | Occupied |
| 1988 | Belleplain State Forest #1 | Nest built near the forest where eagles were being seen (no existing occupied nest)  | Not Used |
| 1989 | Cohansey River             | Original nest was located close to a residential driveway and barn, subject to disturbance. New nest was built 500 yards distant in similar habitat. | Occupied |
| 1993 | Union Lake                 | Original nest was on an island subject to disturbance. New nest was built inland within 1/4 mile.  | Occupied |
| 1997 | Belleplain State Forest #2 | Original nest tree died and nest with young collapsed in storm. New nest built in an adjacent pine within 50 yards and nestling was placed in it.    | Occupied |