

Eagles adapt, people bicker

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To live in New Jersey is to feel squeezed and hemmed in sometimes. After all, ours is the most densely populated state in America.



CHRIS MONROE/SPECIAL TO THE RECORD
One of the resident eagles in Overpeck Park.

But how do you explain the decision by two new immigrants — "Al" and "Alice" — to make their new home within sight and sound of the turnpike, Route 46, a truck lot, a power plant, a police shooting range and a planned mega-development that includes three office buildings of more than 14 stories?

And speaking of congestion, let's not forget the golf driving range with its 60-foot-high nets and a nearby road that includes the Jingle II cocktail lounge and the Lord Jesus Loves Presbyterian Church.

When you consider that Al and Alice are bald eagles who generally crave the equivalent of monastic silence near their nests and wide open space to flex their 7-foot wingspans, scientists are left scratching their heads about what to make of the latest antics of America's national bird.

"This is probably the most urbanized nest in the country," said Kathleen Clark, the supervising zoologist for the state Division of Fish and Wildlife, who tracks eagles' nests across the Garden State and generally finds them in quiet forests.

Al and Alice — their nicknames are courtesy of a gaggle of bird-watchers who keep an eye on them — are nurturing two eaglets in their bathtub-size nest that sits midway up a cottonwood tree overlooking a corner of Overpeck Creek in Ridgefield Park. The adult eagles, each standing roughly 30 inches and sporting the iconic white head feathers, had two

babies last year in the same nest — which means they seem to co-exist just fine amid trucks snorting and the pop-pop-pop of a shooting range.

What seems to have attracted the eagles is the abundance of fish amid the cleaner water of Overpeck Creek, Clark said.

"It's crazy when we look at it," Clark said of the nest's overall neighborhood. "But maybe it's not crazy if you're an eagle."

In other words, this nest is making news, and possibly setting a new standard in the nation's growing bald eagle population, which was almost wiped out in the 1970s by over-use of the pesticide DDT.

In the 1970s, Clark said, New Jersey was home to only one pair of nesting eagles and ended up importing eagles from Canada to restart the population. This year, Clark expects to confirm up to 115 pairs with nests — with dozens of other juvenile eagles that live in New Jersey but haven't mated yet.

But while eagles seem to be thriving, all is not peace, love and understanding among humans.

At least 11 local, state and federal agencies are already playing some role in monitoring the comings and goings of Al, Alice and their babies. These include the Ridgefield Park Zoning and Planning Boards, the Army Corps of Engineers and even the Hackensack Riverkeeper.

Sometimes they are operating against each other. Sometimes they are not even aware of what the others are doing.

The state Department of Environmental Protection, for example, is monitoring the Skymark Corporate Center in Ridgefield Park even though no bricks have been laid or roads built. Ridgefield Park is also monitoring the project.

Buffer zone

While Ridgefield Park is still assessing Skymark's plans to build about 2 million square feet of office space, the DEP recently installed stakes on the Skymark property, setting up a federally mandated 330- to 660-foot buffer zone to protect the eagles' nest.

The DEP says it is holding up approval of land-use permits for Skymark until it completes negotiations to redesign the development to protect the eagles' nest which can't be touched for three years even if the eagles leave according to federal regulations. How Ridgefield Park's zoning and planning boards fit in is still unclear, however.

"Eagles are big. They need their space," said the DEP spokesman Larry Ragonese. "We've worked hard to protect the eagles in New Jersey. We don't take the appearance of eagles lightly."

On the other hand, Ragonese said the DEP is trying to accommodate the needs of developers who want to invest millions of dollars into the state's economy and create new tax ratables.

"You've got to throw the wisdom of Solomon into this," Ragonese said. "It's one of those issues where you have to be green and you have to be smart."

Skymark officials declined to respond to several messages requesting a comment.

Nevertheless, the local chapter of the National Audubon Society has already targeted Skymark as a problem for Al and Alice and their budding family.

"I think Skymark is the greater threat," said Don Torino of Moonachie, president of Bergen Audubon.

Meanwhile, across Overpeck Creek in Ridgefield, environmentalists and zoning officials are watching a new launch set up by the New York Rowing Association, fearing the group will bring too many rowers too close to the nest.

"They are a real headache," Ridgefield's Zoning Officer James Kim said. He claims the rowers are operating without a certification of occupancy from a 2-acre boat launch, which was donated to the association by a local corporation last year, about 400 yards from the nest. Kim also said he issued several summonses after the club brought in a dumpster and cut trees without applying for permits.

The rowing association denies it has acted illegally and claims that it does not need a certificate of occupancy for the launch and that it brought in the trash bin to remove garbage left there illegally over the years. The association, along with other area crew teams, sees Overpeck Creek, with its lack of tides and 2-mile straight course, as one of the area's prime rowing spots.

The association chairman, Vincenzo Paparo of Ramsey, who is also a lawyer and former rower at Fordham University, called the monitoring by Ridgefield a "full fledged assault" on his group even though his rowers follow a state DEP suggestion to keep silent and outside a buffer zone as they pass to the area where they race and train.

"My feeling is that this is political," Paparo said.

'It's their home'

"We don't want to exploit the birds," said the association's executive director, Thomas Curry, a former Don Bosco crew member. "It's their home. It's not a zoo."

The back-and-forth charges between Ridgefield and the rowers are barely a hint of the level of emotion the eagles have sparked. And such exchanges diminish the subtle sense of excitement of having a nesting pair of eagles so close to the hustle and bustle of civilization.

On a recent morning, the two eaglets leapt from their nest and perched on thick branches, flexing their powerful wings, which are already the size of a goose's. Neither eaglet has flown yet. But bird experts say the leaping from branch to branch and the flapping of wings is a sign that flight could begin in the coming days. After that, the eaglets learn to catch fish with their parents by their side.

On a nearby branch, one of the full-grown eagles — it wasn't clear if it was Al or Alice — watched in silence, partially hidden behind a leafy branch.

Across Overpeck Creek, a tractor trailer snorted and backed up, its beep-beep-beep alarm not even causing the eagles to turn and take a look. A snowy white great egret glided up the creek, then dropped into the shallows to catch a fish.

In a grove of ash and maple trees near the truck stop, where the ground was littered with faded bleach bottles and plastic bottle tops and a dented dog repellent canister, Don Torino of the Audubon Society watched through binoculars. Another society member, Denise Farrell of Oradell, gazed through a special telescope mounted atop a tripod.

The eagles flapped their wings, and a tractor trailer's air brakes hissed behind Farrell.

"This is urban bird-watching," she said.

Torino smiled

"These birds have come back from the brink of extinction," he said. "This is really something wonderful."