

## The Capture of Eagle #E63

By Peter Nye

(with links to reading and writing connections)

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Our truck rolled to a stop up against the chain-link fence on the far side of the dam, windshield facing toward the massive reservoir to our right, and steep valley below the dam to our left. I looked at my watch: 6:05am. We had just finished setting up our rocket net 45 feet from four deer carcass' on the far side of the reservoir, about 1/4 mile distant. And, not a moment too soon, as it was now quite light, and within 10 minutes, full dawn had arrived. Here we sat, our fourth day of eagle trapping on the Mongaup Valley Wildlife Management Area in southeastern New York this year, still trying to capture an unbanded, migrant bald eagle.

Even though this area hosts 100-200 eagles each winter, we had so far not been able to capture our target bird, hoping to add another Canadian eagle to our satellite tracking study. Immature eagles had been plentiful, as they were on this day, but they are not suitable candidates for satellite tracking since they are not yet breeders; we are interested in learning the migratory pathways of mature eagles to their nesting grounds.

### \* Visit Vocabulary

It had been a long day already, up at 2:00am and on the road by 3:00am to get here and get set up before the birds left their night roost close to dawn. It is important that the capture site is all prepared and mostly unchanged when the eagles arrive; human activity any near the site will scare them off, sometimes for days. My intern, Amy Rabuck, and I feel very much like closing our eyes for just a quick cat-nap. But like fisherman watching a line that disappears to places unknown, our anticipation and excitement kept that from happening. At any moment, we figured, an eagle could fly up the valley from it's roost, up and over the dam, and land on or near our bait.

We didn't have long to wait. At 6:40 am the first two immature birds came flapping up the valley, pumping hard to gain the elevation needed to clear the huge dam. They flew nearly directly toward the carcass', perching in trees only 50 yards or so away. These were quickly followed by more eagles, both immatures and adults, indicating to us they were all very aware this food source was there. The carcass had been placed for some time, to get the eagles used to this site for exactly this purpose; two fresh ones had been placed just two days before by another member of our team, Kathy Michell. (You should know this is in no way a one-person show; it takes a large team to make all our research come together).

### \* What did you learn about the capture crew?

The presence of 4 adult birds, perched in trees not far from the carcass', really excited us. We watched intently all the movements and actions of the eagles. Crows had been feeding on our offering from first-light, always a good sign, as they seem to be indicators

to the eagles that all must be "all right" down there. An immature eagle landed on the ice 20 yards from the deer, walked in and began feeding at 7:35am. Soon two immatures were feeding, then three, then four. Finally, at 7:50am, an adult landed and began feeding. At first he was very cautious, and was even being pushed around and off the meat sometimes by some of the larger immatures. This gave me the first hint that this was a male eagle, smaller and often submissive to larger females, even if they are immature. I quickly gave the remote-control firing box to Amy, and excitedly gave her some instructions on its use. We had to be patient though, as all the feeding eagles needed to be in just the right spots before we could detonate the rockets that carry the 40' x 60' net over the bait. This is a tense time, waiting, and hoping one of the birds or something else (like another truck driving up on the dam) doesn't spook the adult off the carcass. Through my binoculars, I had already determined this eagle was unbanded, meaning he was not one of our local birds; a perfect candidate for us.

#### \* **Waiting with baited breath**

He was perched atop the main carcass, head down and feeding actively, I told Amy, "Pull!!" A loud bang and huge cloud of smoke instantly covered the trap site and all its occupants as the net deployed. We didn't wait to have a look. By the time the smoke cleared, I was already speeding across the dam and nearly at the trap-site. The truck lurched to a stop; we threw our doors open and ran down onto the ice. There, under our net, was our target adult male and four immature bald eagles. The shot was perfect, and it was only eight o'clock in the morning! Much work lay ahead.

We boxed up our prize adult, and worked on the immatures on the ice one by one, freeing them from the net, banding, tagging measuring then releasing each one. Our adult male took more time, and we were thankful we could work on him in a warm room in one of the power company buildings. In addition to the normal banding, we placed a back-pack satellite radio unit on "E/63", and took a blood sample from him for contaminant analyses. It was nearly noon by the time we had photographed and released him. It had taken us four long days, but we finally got our southeastern NY adult. He now joins the rest of our "on-line" eagles, including the two Craig Thompson and Brian Conway caught this winter over on the Hudson River. We are excited to see where E/63 will go this spring, and hope you are too!

#### \* **Chores before release**

For you real motivated Journey Northerners, you could go back through the archives and look at other eagles captured from this area to see where they went. Do you think E/63 might go to these same areas, simply because he was wintering in the same area as those birds?

--Eagle--

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