

## Bald Eagles Thrill Birdwatchers

*by Parker Pringle (2019)*

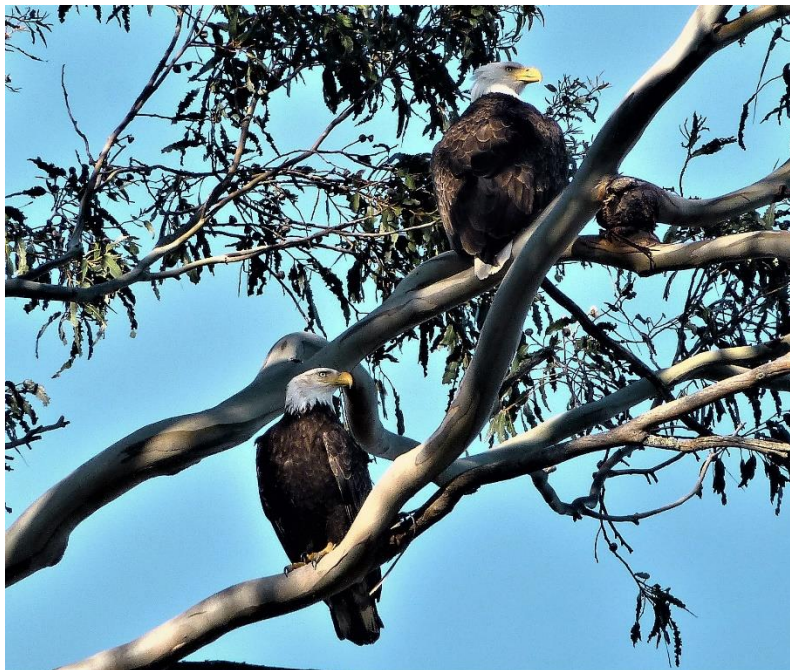
Over this past winter our national bird became a local attraction, with numerous sightings of beautiful adult bald eagles in the lower Corte Madera Creek watershed. Eagle-eyed drivers northbound on Hwy 101 in January may have seen a large, white-hooded female perched atop a redwood tree next to the freeway just before Lucky Drive. Such sights as these promise to become an unremarkable thing as the national resurgence of bald eagles spreads throughout Marin. The return of these majestic birds may be hastened thanks to a historic courtship that has resulted in a pair of local eagles being joined for life, with a good chance they will be raising their offspring in southern Marin.

From a 1960s continental U.S. population of fewer than 500 breeding pairs, the bald eagle population has rebounded to over 10,000 breeding pairs today. They inhabit a variety of habitats, generally close to the lakes, rivers, and bays where they hunt fish and waterfowl. They prefer perching sites, where they will rest while hunting, on the edge of these waterbodies, while nesting and roosting (sleeping) sites can be miles away.

While bald eagles have been seen in Marin for years, only in the last four years have eagles have been seen with regularity in southern and central Marin. One bird in particular, a seven or eight-year-old female, is presumed to be the same pioneer eagle that has been returning around December to the Strawberry peninsula for the past four years. It was this eagle that could be seen perched above the freeway near Lucky Drive. She has been dubbed Freedom by local eagle fans.

In the previous three years Freedom had left the area in February, but this year she remained around through April, using the time to court and pair off with a four- to five-year-old male eagle, named Glory. As eagles mate for life, this was an important event in Freedom's life and provided an extraordinary thrill for eagle watchers in Strawberry, where the romance unfolded. The nesting season in California runs November through April. While no one spotted a nest belonging to Freedom and her mate, there are high hopes that next year this pair will return to nest in southern or central Marin.

This mated pair put on some stunning displays of hunting prowess. They would leap off their respective perches and soar down toward an unfortunate grebe. Talons outstretched, Freedom would make a sweeping lunge at the grebe, which would submerge and pop back up seconds later, in time to see Glory zooming in to make a pass. Flying in a circle, the eagles, if their timing was right, would ultimately tire the bird and be able to grab it. If the timing was off, and the bird had enough time between attacks, it could fly off.



*Birdwatchers in the Strawberry area have dubbed these bald eagles Freedom (right) and Glory. Photo by Connie Mettier*

There was also a number of sightings in Tiburon near Keil Cove, including of an eagle pair. These were almost certainly not the Strawberry eagles. One of those eagles was also seen hunting in Richardson Bay, flying back to Keil Cove with kills.

While there were many eagle sightings reported in Corte Madera this winter, no reports surfaced about eagles hunting. This may be due to the fact that Corte Madera bay is mostly removed from roadways, so viewing is limited. It may also be a less ideal hunting ground than Richardson Bay. But with eagle numbers increasing every winter, it may be only a matter of time before eagles become a regular sight on the creek and the bay. And eaglets, too, if Freedom and her mate select a tree in the watershed for their first nest.

The perch along Hwy 101 that Freedom was using in January is located a few hundred feet north of Shorebird Marsh. In Strawberry, the best viewing areas are the east side of the Strawberry peninsula in the vicinity of Aramburu Island. The eagles perch in a select few trees above the island and will launch hunts from there, often consuming kills on the east shore of the island.

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