Press Release

Release Nr:  2301-01

January 9, 2023

Fort Drum Public Affairs

Fort Drum officials discuss bald eagle protection with Falcon Brigade

FORT DRUM, N.Y. -- Representatives from the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade met with Fort Drum Directorate of Public Works staff and the garrison command team Jan. 6 to discuss America’s enduring symbol of freedom and liberty – the bald eagle.

Bald eagles are known to visit Fort Drum throughout the year, but they were first documented nesting within the installation’s training area in the early summer of 2020.

“We have seen eagles around the Mud Lake area for years, and there has always been stories or sightings of eagles nesting up there, but we could never find a nest,” said Chris Dobony, a fish and wildlife biologist in the Environmental Division’s Natural Resources Branch. “Eagles will typically nest in large trees adjacent to water, so this is a great spot for them.”

But the nest also was in proximity to a frequently used flight route for military aircraft, and close enough to the shoreline that it could be disturbed by recreational boaters and anglers.

The Environmental Division coordinated with the Directorate of Plans, Training, Mobilization and Security, the 10th CAB, and Wheeler-Sack Army Airfield personnel to develop preliminary eagle conservation management actions.

Moving or destroying the nest would have required a U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service permit, but Dobony said no one objected to leaving it where it stood.

Instead, the flight route was moved a quarter mile west to reduce disturbance to the nest and lessen the potential of a wildlife-aircraft strike hazard.

Dobony said that incidents between wildlife and aircraft are rare at Fort Drum, but even one is too many, which is why the working group was established to review avoidance techniques and strategies with the 10th CAB and ensure compliance with the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA).

“As long as we follow that information, we really don’t have to do a whole lot more than what we are currently doing,” he said.

Other conservation efforts were developed using U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service guidelines and the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Bald Eagle Conservation Plan. This included the placement of buffers around the nest to further reduce or eliminate disturbance from aircraft, military training, forest management operations and recreation.

“Initially we put signs up in Mud Lake that read 5 miles per hour, hoping that if boats went by the nests slower, then it would mitigate any disturbance,” Dobony said. “But we saw when the eagles were coming back, they were acting pretty skittish.”

Last year, the eagles were spotted at the nest for a duration lasting less than a month. Dobony said that the amount of activity in the area may have spooked the eagles into looking for a different nesting location.

“Different eagles have different tolerance for disturbance,” he said. “We believe that the recreation activity around the area got to the point where they abandoned the nest. But we’ll see if they come back and try again.”

However, once an eagle nest is established, it – and the tree or structure it is on – remains protected until it is no longer in use.

“We’ve talked to the Fish and Wildlife Service and NYSDEC about this, and they are not requesting any further action from us at this time,” Dobony said. “In the next two or three years, if it looks like the nest has been completely abandoned, then we have a pretty good case to request that some of the restrictions be removed. But we would still monitor the site on an ad hoc basis to see what happens.”

In New York state, wintering eagles begin arriving at nesting sites in December and peak in January and February. By mid-March, eagles will begin incubating their eggs.

“We monitor weekly to see when they come back, and if they attempt to nest,” said Jason Wagner, Natural Resources Branch manager. “It’s all about finding them early and figuring out what they are trying to do.”

“Usually, we will either go in on foot, or take a kayak out to a certain distance and look at the nest to see if the adults are there,” Dobony said. “If they are working on the nest, they’ll be bringing sticks in or perched nearby the nest, and that’s what we look for.”

Dobony said that the Natural Resources Branch will work with the 10th CAB to conduct a drone survey in the spring to potentially identify other eagle nests across Fort Drum, as well as moose and bear activity.

“We are very interested to see if moose populations are expanding onto our property as well,” he said. “Moose have been found on Fort Drum inconsistently over the past five to 10 years, and we’re curious if they are becoming more common. We’ve also had some bear nuisance in the past, so if the survey is conducted late enough in the spring when they are coming out of their dens, we can get a sense of how many we have across the property.”

An increase in eagle sightings could indicate a potential for more nesting sites. Wagner said it is important to identify “must have” flight routes for the 10th CAB in the training ranges to mitigate future risks.

“If we can identify those critical routes where there are trees that could someday have an eagle in it, we want to address that early before it impacts the training mission,” he said. “There’s some advanced management we can do to ensure a nest doesn’t exist where we don’t want it.”

Dobony said that they also advise the 10th Combat Aviation Brigade when aircraft conduct training exercises outside Fort Drum.

“It’s one thing for them to be on Fort Drum, which is made for military training, and we can do our own analysis and assessments,” he said. “But when we have military assets going off post and training in other locations, we don’t have a good sense of what the environmental impacts may be or what concerns there are from NYSDEC or USFWS.”

Dobony said that they worked with both agencies to develop a list of species and locations to establish off-limit areas for aviation training to help mitigate any potential adverse impacts from Fort Drum training.

After attending the working group meeting, Chief Warrant 4 Michael Gazda, 10th CAB standardization officer, said it was valuable to have these conversations that will enable them to be better stewards of the environment.

“Cooperation like this informs every aircrew how to conduct low-level flight operations in an environmentally conscious manner,” he said. “Communication has been important in order to reduce potential in-flight incidents and mitigate impacts to protected species.”

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Photo Captions:

BGEPA\_1 - Chief Warrant 4 Michael Gazda, 10th CAB standardization officer, talks with members of the Fort Drum Environmental Division’s Natural Resources Branch following a working group meeting Jan. 6 on bald eagles. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

BGEPA\_2 - Fort Drum officials meet annually to discuss developments on bald eagle sightings and nesting on post, and the restrictions in place to mitigate the impact that training and recreation has on this wildlife population. (Photo by Mike Strasser, Fort Drum Garrison Public Affairs)

BGEPA\_3 - Fort Drum officials meet annually to discuss developments on bald eagle sightings and nesting on post, and the restrictions in place to mitigate the impact that training and recreation has on this wildlife population. (New York State Department of Environmental Conservation photo)