

Story by Randy Mallory

# SOARING OR EAGLE EYE

Nature lovers ply Texas waterways  
in search of the great baldies.

Six-year-old Patrick Huebner sits anxiously on the open-air deck of Texas Eagle II, the 200-passenger flagship of Vanishing Texas River Cruise. It's moored on Lake Buchanan, 70 miles northwest of Austin. As the triple-decker eases from its Hill Country dock, Patrick isn't pondering the bald eagle's status--as America's emblem for 218 years and as a "comeback kid" after decades of endangerment.

The Fort Worth first-grader has one thing in mind: He can't wait to see a bald eagle in the wild.

"Patrick's teacher asked him to write a life journal. He wrote mostly about animals," says Patrick's dad, Tim Huebner, an aquarium keeper at the Fort Worth Zoo. "So we gave him another notebook, and he started his own wildlife journal."

Warm and cozy on the ship's enclosed weather deck, nature lovers Glen and Julie Hertenberger of Austin work on *their* journal--a life-long bird checklist. "Once our kids left home, we started traveling after wildlife, especially birds," says Glen, a raptor guidebook in one hand and binoculars in the other. "This trip we're after eagles."

Ship captain Shawn Devaney encourages them to keep their eagle eyes peeled this sunny, mild January day. "Cold, rainy days are usually best, because eagles stay close to the water looking for prey. But," he adds optimistically, "we may still be in luck."

After an hour of pleasant motoring--and several false alarms--someone shouts and points, "There's one in that tree!"

Indeed, the telltale markings of an adult bald eagle--white head and tail, brown body, yellow beak and talons--punctuate the deep blue sky. Another baldy lands nearby and watches for fish. For what seems like an eternity--probably just five or ten minutes--50 sets of binoculars focus on the pair perched not 60 yards away. Suddenly, the regal raptors bolt from the treetop and, with a few graceful strokes, circle out of sight.

"They told me when I got my ticket that we'd see eagles," says a thrilled Betty Boyce of San Antonio, "and they were sure right!"

In mid-winter, nature lovers take guided tours on two other Texas lakes which harbor the illusive national bird.

Bald eagles flock in such large numbers to Lake Fork, located 65 miles east of Dallas, that Rains County convinced the Texas Legislature in 1995 to name it "The Eagle Capital of Texas." (27) (An annual one-day survey has noted as many as 140 baldies on Lake Fork.) (4)

The county seat, Emory, even holds an annual Eagle Fest (January 20-21, 2001) featuring raptor shows, Indian dancers, entertainment, food, and two-hour eagle tours.

On one tour, guide David Sierra, wildlife biologist for Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD), stands at the bow of the barge shoulder to shoulder with Stan and Susan Smith of Dallas. The Smiths began bird-watching about the time the Eagle Fest started in 1995 and have been on all but one of its tours. "Last year we saw 15 bald eagles," says Stan, eager for another good year.

The double-decked barge skirts past snags to a tree-lined cove where several anglers cast for bass. David Sierra points out a flock of white pelicans, a great blue heron, a red-tailed hawk, a few slate-gray coots, and ducks of various types. And he

offers eagle-watching tips: “Eagles fly with their wings straight out, not tilted in a ‘V’ shape. And, remember, they don’t grow their white feathers until they’re four to six years old. So if you see a large brown bird that looks like a golden eagle, it could be a juvenile bald eagle.”

Through his long-barreled spotting scope, the wildlife specialist finally sees a solitary adult baldy--to the delight of fellow passengers--in an elm straight ahead. “I think he’s just warming up in the sun,” he notes.

Warmth of a different kind attracts eagles to Fairfield Lake, located 75 miles east of Waco.

“Our lake is 20 to 30 degrees warmer in winter than most lakes,” says Dennis Walsh, superintendent of Fairfield Lake State Park, which encompasses 1,400 lakefront acres. “That’s because a TXU electric generation plant uses the lake water in its steam turbines and recycles it back into the lake at 80 to 90 degrees. The warm water encourages plant and fish growth, and that means more food for our bald eagles.”

In 1991 the park kicked off its eagle tours. “I’ve been fishing this lake and watching eagles for many years,” says Billy Schick, park staffer and driver of the park’s bi-leveled tour barge, “and I’m always amazed when I see one swoop out of the sky and snatch a fish from the water.” (28)

Found only in North America, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) ranges from Alaska to northern Mexico. Congress made it our national emblem in 1782 when an estimated 100,000 bald eagles populated what’s now the lower 48 states. (6, 23, 8) Perhaps twice or three times that many lived in Alaska and Canada. (13, 8)

Numbers in the lower 48 began to skid in the mid to late 1800s as burgeoning cities and farms disturbed eagle habitat and food supplies. (13, 5, 6, 8) Ranchers and farmers killed eagles in a misguided attempt to protect livestock. (Eagles eat mostly fish and waterfowl.) (8, 11, 5, 7)

On the wings of public concern, Congress made it illegal in 1940 to kill a bald eagle or possess its eggs or feathers. (To supply Native Americans with eagle feathers, which many consider sacred, the federal government set up a repository for dead eagles in Denver, Colorado.) (7, 8, 9)

A bald eagle, typically three feet long with a wingspan of seven feet, can live 30 years or more and mates for life. A breeding pair builds a stick nest in the crown of a tall, flat-topped tree near water. They line the massive nests (which can measure six feet across and weigh hundreds of pounds) with soft materials such as grass, leaves, and moss. Adults perennially return to the same nest to lay an average of two eggs. (6, 7, 8, 11, 14)

Reproduction rates plummeted after World War II as Americans began controlling insects with the pesticide DDT. Fish ate DDT-laced bugs, and eagles ate contaminated fish. The chemical made females lay eggs with shells so thin, they broke under the nesting parent's weight. (6, 7, 8, 11) \_\_\_\_\_

In 1963 a U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) survey of the contiguous states turned up only 417 nesting pairs. That year, in *A Field Guide to the Birds of Texas*, naturalist Roger Tory Peterson termed the bald eagle a "rare local resident near the coast."

In another 1963 book, *Silent Spring*, federal biologist-turned-writer Rachel Carson pinpointed pesticide problems and stirred an environmental awakening. (10, 6) Congress banned DDT in 1972 and, the next year, passed the Endangered Species Act. (7, 8, 10)

With endangered status and without DDT, bald eagles proliferated from 416 pairs in 1963 to 5,748 pairs in 1998 in the lower 48 states. (Populations in Alaska and Canada were never endangered.) (21) The USFWS upgraded bald eagles' status from endangered to threatened in 1995. And in 1999 President Clinton proposed removing even the threatened status, a proposal still under study. (7, 8, 12)

Trends also are up in Texas, says wildlife biologist Kevin Herriman of Tyler. He tallies the annual mid-winter bald eagle count of the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (TPWD). Last season, counters sighted 218 baldies on 20 lakes statewide. Most of these nest in northern states, but when temperatures there drop and lakes freeze, they migrate to Texas. Here they stay from October to March, feeding on plentiful fish and waterfowl. In spring, they return north. (11, 16, 17, 18, 22)

Other bald eagles (considered a separate subspecies by some experts) nest in Texas, primarily in the state's southeastern corner. They build or repair permanent nests beginning in November, hatch eggs in January, and fledge their eaglets in early spring. Last year, TPWD wildlife biologist Len Polasek of Bastrop charted 65 active nests producing 102 fledglings. Len says most Texas-born eagles leave their territories in late spring or early summer to feed elsewhere for a few months, then return home. (14, 16, 17, 18, 22)

"No one knows why eagles nest in Texas," says Ricky Maxey, TPWD wildlife diversity biologist in Nacogdoches. "But we do know that people and eagles co-habitate well on reservoirs where there's good fishing."

Shawn Devaney joined Vanishing Texas River Cruise in 1982 during its inaugural season of sightseeing on Lake Buchanan and the Colorado River. (He and wife Michelle now own the operation.) At the time, he knew the lake sported good fishing. But he didn't know it also had eagles.

"Rose Farmer of the Austin Nature Center identified an eagle in October of our first year," Shawn recalls. "We started our eagle tours right away." Since then, he's carried some 360,000 people to view the majestic birds.

"Once, we saw a juvenile catch a carp that was too heavy for him to carry off," Shawn says. "We watched it and three other juveniles struggle over the fish for 30

minutes. Then an adult came out of the sky, grabbed the carp, and flew off with it. It was incredible!

“Giving people that kind of experience is the greatest protection we can give bald eagles.”

If young Patrick Huebner--working on his wildlife journal with binoculars draped around his neck--is any measure, the future looks bright for baldies. Even before Shawn Devaney's Texas Eagle II pulls into dock, an excited Patrick jots down the day's triumph--his first sighting of a bald eagle in the wild.

Indeed, the day's been a soaring success for both boy and bird.

## TEXAS HIGHWAYS--EAGLE TOURS--WWH--MALLORY

### Bald Eagle Tours

Nature lovers can see bald eagles on lakes and rivers in many parts of the state. Peak season is October-March. The following locations offer guided bald eagle tours. For best viewing, bring binoculars or a spotting scope. Dress warmly as most vessels are open-air. In case of rain, call ahead to make sure tours are running.

The sixth annual **Eagle Fest**, Jan 20-21, is at Emory, approximately 65 mi. east of Dallas. The event features 2-hour barge tours--plus raptor shows, Indian dancers, entertainment, food, and vendors. It's held at the Rains Co. Fair Grounds on the south side of the intersection of US 69 and Texas 19. Call for hours. Fee: \$15 adults, \$13 seniors (60 and up), \$12 children (5-12). No children 4 and under. Wheelchair accessible. Write to Eagle Fest, Box 695, Emory 75440 (800/561-1182) or the Rains Co. Area Chamber of Commerce, Box 475, Emory 75440 (903/473-3913). Web site: [www.rainscounty.org](http://www.rainscounty.org) (click Eagle Fest).

The Eagle Fest will feature educational raptor demonstrations by **Last Chance Forever**. The San Antonio-based raptor rehabilitation center also will present educational raptor demonstrations Feb 1 in Laredo, Feb 2 in Kingsville, and Feb 2-4 in Houston. The center offers tours of its raptor facilities by appointment with two weeks notice. For details, write to Box 460993, San Antonio 78246 (210/499-4080; Web site--[www.lastchanceforever.org](http://www.lastchanceforever.org)).

Fairfield Lake State Park (near Fairfield in Freestone Co.) is approximately 90 miles southeast of Dallas. From I-45, take US 84 east to FM 488. Turn left on FM 488, then right on FM 2570, and right again on FM 3285 to the park entrance. Hours for the 2-hour barge tour: 10-noon (with a second tour from 1-3, if necessary) on Dec 16 and 30, Jan 6, 20, and 27, and Feb 3, 10, 17, and 24. Groups of 15 or more may schedule tours at other times with advance notice. Reservations required. Fee: \$15, adults (\$10

with Texas Conservation Passport), \$10 for 16 and under, with group discounts available. Wheelchair accessible. Write to Fairfield Lake State Park, 123 State Park Rd 64, Fairfield 75840 (903/389-4514).

Vanishing Texas River Cruise offers eagle tours aboard a climate-controlled, 70-foot cruise boat. The boarding dock is in the Canyon of the Eagles Nature Park, approximately 70 miles northwest of Austin on the east shore of Lake Buchanan. From Burnet (located at the intersection of US 281 and Texas 29), take Texas 29 west 3 miles to RM 2341. Turn right (north) and go 14 miles to the park. Hours for the 2-1/2 tour: 11 a.m. daily (except Tue) Nov-Mar. Other tours may be added, depending on demand. Fee: \$15 adults, \$13 seniors/students, \$10 children 6-12, free under 6. Hours for the 4-hour tour (when water levels allow): 9 a.m. Sat-Sun, Nov-Mar. Fee (lunch included): \$26.95 adults, \$21.95 children 3-12, free under 3. Reservation recommended. Wheelchair accessible (depending on water levels). During Eagle Awareness Week, the first week of Dec. each year (Dec. 1-9, 2001), Vanishing Texas offers raptor demonstrations by Last Chance Forever. Write to Box 901, Burnet 78611 (800/4-RIVER-4 or 512/756-6986). Web site: [www.vtrc.com](http://www.vtrc.com).

Martin Creek Lake State Park is 20 miles southeast of Longview in Rusk Co. Take Texas 43 to CR 2183 and go south to the park. Leaving from the state park's boat house, the private, non-profit State Park Ministries offers a 2-hour barge tour on Martin Creek Lake. Hours: 9-11 and 1-3 Sat and 11:30-1:30 and 3-5 Sun, Nov-Feb. Reservations only. Fee: \$15 adults, \$7.50 children 6-12, free under 6. Not wheelchair accessible. Write to Rev. C.H. Collins, Box 8270, Longview 75607 (903/643-7358).

#### Other Viewing Sites

Along the coast, stop by Lake Texana, 35 mi. northeast of Victoria. A viewing stand in the parking lot on the east side of the dam overlooks a bald eagle nesting site. For details, call the Lavaca-Navidad River Authority, 361/782-5229. For general viewing in East Texas, look in treetops along the shores of Lake Fork, Sam Rayburn

Reservoir, Lake O' the Pines, Lake Texoma, Lake Palestine, Wright Patman Reservoir, Fairfield Lake, and Toledo Bend Reservoir. In the Panhandle try Lake Meredith, and in the Hill Country visit Lake Buchanan.

#### Bald Eagle Count

Jan 12-14, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Dept. conducts its annual midwinter bald eagle count at 20 lakes statewide. Volunteers may be needed on some lakes. To participate, contact Annice Storey, TPWD, 11942 FM 848, Tyler 75707-9657 (903/566-1626).

#### Resources

For more information on bald eagles and other rare wildlife, look for Endangered and Threatened Animals of Texas by Linda Campbell (University of Texas Press, 800/252-3206). Or check the Texas Parks & Wildlife Dept. Web site for bald eagles: [www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/endang/birds/baldeagl.htm](http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/endang/birds/baldeagl.htm). Also on the Internet, check the "live eagle cam" ([www.eaglewatch.com/liveeaglecam.htm](http://www.eaglewatch.com/liveeaglecam.htm)), a Web site with frequently updated video images of a bald eagle nest at Reelfoot Lake State Park in Tiptonville, Tennessee.

## TEXAS HIGHWAYS--EAGLE TOURS--RESOURCES--MALLORY

1. John Karger, Last Chance Forever
2. Shawn Devaney, Vanishing Texas River Cruise--800-728-8735
3. David Sierra, TPWD
4. Kevin Herriman, TPWD re: bird count
5. <http://www.edf.org/Want2Help/ES/baldeagle.html>  
re: pop. decline/increase
6. <http://www.nwf.org/nwf/wildalive/eagle/bigpicture.html>  
re: gen. facts/recovery
7. <http://endangered.fws.gov/i/b/msab0h.html>  
re: gen. facts/endangered status
8. <http://www.fws.gov/r9extaff/eaglejuly2.html>  
re: de-listing
9. <http://www.r6.fws.gov/eagle/>  
re: Native American use of eagle feathers
10. <http://darwin.bio.uci.edu/~sustain/bio65/lec14/b65lec14.htm>  
re: Silent Spring/DDT
11. <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/nature/endang/birds/baldeagl.htm>  
re: gen. facts
12. Cindy Hoffman, USFWS spokesperson re: de-listing
13. *The American Eagle*, John Pezzenti Jr., Penguin 1999; p. xxxii-xxxviii
14. *Hawks, Eagles & Falcons of North America*, Paul A. Johnsgard, Smithsonian '90; pp. 143-151.
15. <http://www.tpwd.state.tx.us/hunt/research/b-eagles.htm>  
re: nesting/wintering
16. *Texas Parks & Wildlife* magazine, Jan. '96, pp. 16-23.
17. Ricky Maxey, TPWD biologist
18. Chris Gregory, TPWD field specialist
19. *Endangered and Threatened Animals of Texas*, Linda Campbell, TPW Press '95
20. Tim Huebner, FW Zoo
21. <http://www.fws.gov/r3pao/eagle/population/chtofprs.html>

re: bald eagle pairs chart

22. Len Polasek, TPWD re: nest survey
23. *Texas Highways*, Jan '95 pp.-14 re: history/status
24. Glen Hertenberger, quoted
25. Gene Rees, TPWD re: Lake Texana obsv. deck
26. *A Field Guide to the Birds of Texas*, Roger Tory Peterson, Houghton Mifflin, 1963; p. 69
27. Eagle Fest/Rains Co. Chamber (Suzanne Gleason)
28. Dennis Walsh, Billy Schick, Fairfield Lake S.P.

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