

# PROTECTING EAGLE ESSENTIALS

By Glenn Oakley

**B**ald eagles need three essentials in winter, says raptor biology graduate student Greg Kaltenecker: a roost, food and protection from disturbance. Kaltenecker, along with Boise State University biology professor Marc Bechard and Ecological Design Inc., director Rob Tiedemann, will conduct a \$25,000 study to determine how those three essentials — and thus the eagles — can be protected along the Boise River.

The grant from the Ada Planning Association will lead to a report by March 1994 making recommendations for protecting eagle habitat. At stake are 19 proposed road, bridge and trail projects along the river.

The team will review and synthesize previous Boise River studies and conduct new eagle census counts every two weeks during November, December and February. The team's report will be reviewed by former BSU biology professor Jim Bednarz, now at Arkansas State University.

Kaltenecker has studied the Boise River eagles since 1986, starting as an undergraduate assistant to graduate student Robin Spahr. He has since taken on his own project for a master's thesis. Spahr studied the river habitat of wintering eagles from Lucky Peak Dam downstream to Garden City. Kaltenecker surveyed bald eagles and their preferred habitat from Lucky Peak upstream to Featherville on the South Fork Boise River and to Atlanta on the Middle Fork Boise during the winters of 1990-91 and 1991-92. His U.S. Forest Service-sponsored study included weekly aerial surveys plus on-the-ground observations.

"I'm fairly convinced the eagles we see through town are the same eagles I see 50-60 miles upstream at Anderson Ranch Dam," he says. A population of 15-30 eagles roost each winter in the old cottonwoods at Barber Pool, a natural area upstream of Barber Dam and on the south side of the river. These eagles leave the roost each morning to forage for food. Flying downstream into the city of Boise or upstream along the South or Middle forks of the Boise.

Frequently the eagles will venture 10-15 miles away from the river corridor to feed on winter-killed deer and elk. Some of these Barber Pool eagles also end up hunting whitefish and suckers in the pools below Anderson Ranch Dam, says Kaltenecker. However, there is already a roosting population of eagles downstream from the dam.

"As we get more disturbance in town we'll see fewer eagles," he predicts. "They'll go upstream — if there's enough food." He suggests that there may not be room for all the Barber Pool eagles on the South Fork Boise should they be displaced from the river through town.

The biggest impact on the eagles may well be the construction of the Diversion Dam bridge upstream of the Barber Pool roosting area. The bridge will tie I-84 to Idaho 21. "The integrity of that roost area by Barber Pool is very important," says Kaltenecker. "They need a place where they can roost communally undisturbed." He notes that eagles only roost communally during the winter months.

Boise's bald eagles can seem immune to human activity as they perch on cottonwood snags next to corporate office buildings. Kaltenecker says the buildings may not bother the eagles as long as the people remain discreetly hidden inside. Similarly, Spahr's research showed that bicyclists and cross-country skiers moving steadily along the river corridor caused little anxiety among the



*A bald eagle cruises at cottonwood tree-top level over the Boise River.*

eagles, whereas walkers who stopped to admire the birds frightened them off. Eagles don't appreciate the attention.

Yet the eagles are a source of pride and profit for the city and developers who can tout the presence of the raptors as a sign that Boise has kept the river a natural environment where people and wildlife can coexist. For now that may be true. But in the five years that Kaltenecker has studied Boise River eagles, several sections of the river have been turned into pricey housing developments.

The good news is that bald eagle populations throughout the state of Idaho — and in fact the entire country — are increasing. The bad news is the eagle population in Boise is remaining stable at best, says Kaltenecker.

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