

Number of Arizona eagles, nesting areas on the rise

By SHANNA HOGAN TRIBUNE -

Despite intense heat, increased development and a diminishing water supply, bald eagles in Arizona are making a comeback.

Three new bald eagle breeding areas, or nests, were discovered this year, for a record total of 50 nests. The new areas were found in northeastern Arizona and along the Verde River.

"Usually every couple of years we may find a new breeding area," said Tuk Jacobson, an Arizona Game and Fish biologist. "Finding three in one year was pretty surprising."

Besides more breeding areas, 42 eaglets lived to fledge, or begin flying, tying the previous Arizona record that was set in 2004.

Eagles in the East Valley nest in the Tonto National Forest east of Scottsdale, along the Verde River southeast of Fountain Hills and along the Salt River northeast of Mesa .

The success of the bald eagle breeding season, which ended June 30, is due largely to protection efforts, Jacobson said. Those efforts include stationing nest watchers to monitor the eagles and notify rescuers of any danger to the birds.

Since the nest watching program began in 1978, it has helped to save the lives of almost 50 eaglets. This year alone, nest watchers helped rescue four young eagles.

While the increase in breeding areas is a positive sign, the eagle population is still low in Arizona as compared to other states, said Bob Witzeman, conservation chairman of the Maricopa Audubon Society.

"It doesn't mean they're out of the woods," he said. "A population of only 50 pair is still miniscule."

In March, the Maricopa Audubon Society and the Center For Biological Diversity filed a lawsuit to have the Arizona desert nesting bald eagle classified as a distinct species.

Arizona eagles have adapted to the hot weather and evolved into a nonmigrating resident of the Southwest, Witzeman said.

Bald eagles were near extinction 30 years ago when they became one of the first species to be placed on the list of threatened or endangered species.

Nationally, the population has rebounded enough that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is moving forward with efforts to have bald eagles delisted.

If this happens, the Arizona eagle will suffer, Witzeman said; "If you take it off the the endangered species list, the money will dry up."

Arizona Game and Fish officials said the eagles will continue to receive protection, even if removed, through voluntary programs and state eagle protection laws.

More breeding eagles Arizona Game and Fish biologists confirm a record number of breeding eagles this year.