

Webcam to Capture Eagles in Nest Overlooking Monongahela River

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By Mary Ann Thomas

The Pennsylvania Game Commission and a Murrysville company set up the state's first eagle nest video camera in Hays for live streaming on the Internet.

Workers from the commission and PixController Inc. mounted the camera, perhaps the first ever with remote tilt and zoom capabilities on an eagles' nest, on a steep wooded hillside overlooking the Monongahela River on Friday.

Trib Total Media, parent company of the Tribune-Review, will stream the live feed on its website beginning in February through nesting season in the summer. The Game Commission, the nest cam host WildEarth.TV and PixController also will offer footage.

Pittsburgh's bald eagle pair reared one young chick this year, which was the first successful eagle nesting in the city in more than 200 years, according to game commission officials.

There's another eagles' nest on the steep cliff rising above Route 28 in Harmar.

The commotion of an active rail line in Hays, a busy scrap yard, and even a throng of eagle watchers who cheered when an eagle delivered a freshly caught fish to his family hasn't disrupted nesting activities so far.

“We knew how popular these eagles have been here,” said Hal Korber, a New Kensington native and a photographer and videographer with the game commission.

In 1989, Korber was with the game commission on its last trip to retrieve eaglets from a nest in Saskatchewan to rebuild the population in Pennsylvania that the pesticide DDT had decimated to only three pairs.

The restoration efforts of the commission grew the eagle population to 266 nesting pairs this year, causing the agency to remove the bird from the state's threatened species list in October. It continues to have a “protected” status.

“This is darn exciting,” Korber said at the eagles' nest as fellow commission employee Derek Spitler climbed more than 30 feet up a tree next to the nest to install the eagle cam.

The nest's location and the commission's previous work with PixController made the Hays

nest an ideal site for a nest camera with live video feed, according to Tom Fazi, the commission's information and education supervisor for the southwest region.

“It's exciting to get to this point on a project that is so important,” said Bill Powers, president of PixController.

Powers' company has set up cameras to record in real time the peregrine falcons at the University of Pittsburgh, a bear den in Minnesota — which yielded the first filmed birth of bear young in hibernation — and wildlife throughout the world.

The company is working with WildEarth.TV and National Geographic to install cameras to watch wildlife in the Congo.

The local bird project is a passion of Powers, whose company specializes in surveillance and security cameras. He is donating the use of his equipment and expertise for the Pittsburgh eagle cam. Interstate Batteries of North Versailles donated the batteries for transmission of the feed. Powers is using solar panels for the camera system.

“This is going to show real life,” Fazi said. “This is going to be educational. And it will likely be graphic at times.”

As bald eagles are predatory birds and scavengers of dead animals, the camera should capture the birds bringing fish and other animals to its young.

The game commission is talking to Pittsburgh Public Schools and other districts about streaming the nest feed to classrooms.

The public's response to the Hays nest has been phenomenal, according to wildlife officials.

“I knew every sneeze that those birds made,” said Beth Fife, a conservation officer with the game commission.

Eagles have been popular subjects for live streaming at other nests across the country.

“They're charismatic and beautiful,” said Charles Eldermire, bird cams project leader for the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in Ithaca, N.Y.

The lab has a number of webcams, among them a red-tailed hawk's nest as well as the great blue heron and others, whose live feed has been picked up by websites in more than 100 countries.

“We have found that people have an emotional experience when they view these birds on a daily basis,” Eldermire said. “There's something there that resonates with us. A certain (interest) in what we have to do on a daily basis to survive. And the viewing experience is

sparked by extraordinary moments of beauty and resilience. They struggle just like we do to raise young, get food and succeed.”

The game commission has posted restrictions outside the Hays nest.

If anyone is found within 660 feet of the nest, they could be hit with fines of \$1,000 to \$10,000. The bird is protected by state laws as well as the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

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