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ALERT

The eagle has landed: After decades flying thousands of miles to find nests, pair of Virginia eagle spotters make final flight

By Rex Springston Special correspondent
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Bald eagle in flight over the James River.

Parks Rountrey

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W&M eagle experts and a pilot are retiring from bald eagle surve…

W&M eagle experts and a pilot are retiring from bald eagle surveys after 60-year research.

When biologist Mitchell Byrd began counting bald eagles in Virginia, there wasn't much to count. It was 1977, and there were only 33 nests in the state. Along the James River, there were none.

Pollution was killing the big birds.

What followed was one of the most remarkable comebacks in conservation history. So many eagles inhabit Virginia now that they are raising families in people's yards and waging bloody wars over prime nest sites.

"The growth of the eagle population was very slow at first, but once it got established, it was very rapid," said Byrd, now 92.

Today, there are more than 1,500 eagle nests in the eastern third of Virginia — including the Richmond area — with 340 along the James River alone. Three pairs of eagles are nesting right here in the city.

How do we know? Because Byrd, fellow biologist Bryan Watts and Richmond-area pilot Caton "Fuzzzo" Shermer have flown thousands of miles to find nests, count eagles and study how the nation's living symbol is faring.

Now, the birds' big comeback and the age of the eagle spotters tell the men it's time to quit. After nearly 30 years together, Watts, 60, and Shermer, 79, will make the final flight this month, ending the survey that began in 1962 — almost surely the longest study of its type in the country.

"It has been an amazing ride," said Watts, the team leader. "We have seen generations of eagles moving across the landscape and recapturing creek after creek and somehow making them whole again."

A painful knee has kept Byrd out of the cockpit this year. Previously, he had participated in every survey since that 1977 flight.

"That's got to be a record," Byrd said. "I think I did my duty."

Experts figured eagles were "in deep trouble" in Virginia in the 1960s, but no one had the proof that would trigger efforts to help them, said Len Smock, a retired Virginia Commonwealth University biologist and president of the Richmond Audubon Society, a bird-watching group.

"Mitchell Byrd and Bryan Watts turned that around," Smock said. "Their groundbreaking aerial surveys provided that information, directly leading to the incredible resurgence of eagles."

Bald eagles are impressive birds with dark brown bodies, bright white heads and tails, and wings that can span 7 feet. People who don't know a titmouse from a pterodactyl can spot an eagle.

But the public didn't always love eagles. From the late 1800s well into the 20th century, people shot them and poisoned them, considering them pests that might kill farmers' chickens or take watermen's fish.

The big eagle killers, however, were post-World War II pollutants. Eagles nearly went extinct in the continental United States in the 1960s, mainly because the pesticide DDT tainted the fish they ate.

The federal government banned the use of DDT in 1972, and legal protections, such as the Endangered Species Act, also helped. Eagles came soaring back.

There are so many eagles now that virtually all the best nest spots — typically tall pines near water — are taken from Richmond east. Once considered shy, eagles are now nesting in backyards and along farm ponds.

The aerial survey counts nesting eagles, but there are thousands more lone adults, called “floaters,” that are attacking parent birds in life-or-death battles over nest sites.

“It’s a bloody war that’s going on out there,” Watts said.

Father birds are spending a lot of time fighting attackers — time those parents could use finding food. For that reason, Watts said, today’s eagles, while up in numbers, are producing about half as many chicks as they did 20 years ago — about one per nest today, down from about two before.

Watts is director of the Center for Conservation Biology at the College of William & Mary. He and Byrd founded the scientific and educational organization in 1992.

Byrd is bald and gnomelike, with a wry wit. (A woman once asked Byrd if eagles mate for life. “No,” he replied, “they take a break once in a while.”) Watts is dark haired with some gray, a little rugged looking and more serious. The two are widely recognized eagle experts, and they are fast friends. Byrd, a former W&M professor, taught Watts. They live in the Williamsburg area.

The aerial survey involves some expert flying by Shermer, well-known in Richmond aviation circles as “Captain Fuzzzo.” (“The middle ‘z’ is silent,” he likes to say.)

Shermer holds a federal certificate that allows him to swoop low over the nests, sometimes within 50 feet. “You need to get to the point where if there is an egg in the nest, you can see it and count it.”

For decades, the survey counted eagles in a key stronghold, the Chesapeake Bay region — the bay and the tidal rivers feeding it, including the James right up to the rapids in Richmond. When the birds became almost too numerous to count, the spotters switched in 2017 to checking the James only.

While eagles are super-abundant in the bay region today, less is known about the birds in western Virginia. But Watts said eagles probably inhabit every part of the state now.

In the city of Richmond alone, eagles are nesting downtown atop a huge metal tower just downriver from the Manchester Bridge; on Williams Island near the river's Pony Pasture area; and in the Stony Point area of South Side.

Jack Abbott, a crack amateur naturalist in Northern Virginia, began the eagle flights in 1962, using his own money, grants and some donated military flights, Watts said.

Fred Scott of Richmond, an expert bird watcher, assisted with separate flights that began in 1963.

The men found what people found in other states: The nation's living symbol was on the brink of extinction. The main culprit was the DDT.

The federal government put the eagle on the endangered-species list in 1967. Scientists made plans across the lower 48 states to bring back the bird. The aptly named Byrd led a team of experts that devised the plan for the Chesapeake Bay region.

That work led to more-systematic flights in Virginia, which Byrd began in 1977.

Watts joined Byrd in the cockpit in 1992, and Shermer became the pilot the next year.

The survey involves flying a few times in late winter to find nests, and then again in early spring to check out the chicks.

Many states have monitored eagles by plane, but Virginia's survey is almost surely the longest, Watts said. Maryland's ended 17 years ago.

Since Byrd took over the Virginia survey in 1977, the program has cost about $22,000 a year in state and federal money, plus a similar amount in donated money and time, Watts said.

The mountain of data from the survey — on old paper forms and maps from early days, and in digital form more recently — is “a national treasure” that has produced numerous scientific studies, with more to come, Watts said.

Shermer, who flew Air Force fighter jets in the Vietnam War and commercial planes later, surely spoke for the team when he said of the eagle survey: “It’s been the most rewarding mission I’ve ever done.”

As for Byrd, he began researching Virginia birds in the 1950s. Are age and that bad knee forcing him to wind down his career?

“I think it’s wound up,” he said.