



# My Year with the Lynnhaven Eagles



PHOTO BY: WILLIE KEE

by Willie Kee

Last March, I was walking south on the beach at the north end of Virginia Beach. The beach sand was flat, with a brisk northeast wind on my back as the waves crashed on the shore. Something down the beach, about 70th street, caught my eye. It was two large raptors; something I was not used to seeing at the beach. I zoomed in with the telephoto lens on

my camera and discovered that it was two mature bald eagles. It was my first time observing American Bald Eagles in Virginia Beach and I was hooked. For the past year, I have taken many photos of the eagles and have been trying to learn as much as I can about them.

Later in March, an old friend, whose family has been fishing on the Lynnhaven River for 40 years, called me and suggested that I head over to Alanton to photograph some big raptors in a tree. There they were, two mature American Bald Eagles and a juvenile in a tall pine tree in someone's yard. It turns out that the nest they had taken over belonged to an osprey who wasn't going to give it up without a fight. The confrontation continued for the next four months until the eagles won possession of the nest.

About a month later, in April, my brother called me up and said, "Get over to the eagles nest now! The researchers are going up in a hydraulic lift to remove the four-week-old eaglet for a physical test." Dr. Watts, director for The Center for Conservative Biology and Reese Lukei, his field associate and our local raptor expert, brought the eaglet down from the nest, banded it and recorded height, weight, beak and wing span measurements. Nuckols Tree Service worked hand and hand with the researchers.

By June, the eaglet had grown into a juvenile eagle. Her gray down fur turned into a brown speckled white neck and chest. Her hooked beak was black but had yellow tones by the eyes and lower jaw. She now appeared similar to a hawk and was starting to learn to use her sharp talons to defend herself and catch prey. Learning to use her talons to grip a branch for balance and support wasn't an easy task for the young raptor as she began to venture out of the nest. She could be seen in the tree next to their nest working daily to improve her sense of balance and wing strength.

The big day came in July when the adult eagles enticed the juvenile to jump and try to fly from their perch 90 feet up in the pine tree. Getting her to make this leap of faith wasn't easy. The female adult eagle would fly by the nest with a fish in her talons, but the juvenile wasn't hungry. She tried to nudge her with a polite peck of her beak or tap of the talons, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, the juvenile eagle, nicknamed by the neighborhood, The Duchess of Windsor, sailed out over the Lynnhaven River.

These majestic raptors are fascinating to observe. They are protected and their numbers are growing. If we are lucky, we will attract more eagles to the Lynnhaven. Thank you Lynnhaven River NOW for keeping a good eye on conservation.

You can contact Willie Kee at [eaglemanvb@gmail.com](mailto:eaglemanvb@gmail.com).



PHOTO BY: REESE LUKEI

LYNNHAVEN River NOW

Restoring a legend.



# Bald Eagles on the Lynnhaven River

by Mary Reid Barrow and Reese Lukei

Though it's still a wonderful sight to see a bald eagle soaring overhead on the Lynnhaven River, the sight is not as rare these days as it used to be.

"There has been lots of eagle activity along the river," said Virginia Beach's eagle expert and Lynnhaven River Now member, Reese Lukei.

The sightings began a few years ago when a bald eagle pair nested in First Landing State Park. Though the nest blew down in a storm two years ago, it is highly likely that the same eagle pair is now nesting in an Alanton resident's front yard, Lukei said.

The pair is thought to have fledged 10 youngsters in the state park and last year they fledged one youngster from the Alanton nest. This year the female is sitting on eggs she laid in the middle of February.

So far that is the only known nesting eagles in the Lynnhaven river watershed, but that has been enough to bring eagle sightings back to the river. Just this year residents have sighted eagles flying over Thalia, Little Neck, Great Neck and Linkhorn Bay this winter. Some believe the sightings are so numerous that there has to be another nest in the vicinity.

The Alanton male may be seen fishing for dinner for him and his mate and the female can be seen soaring overhead, getting some exercise while dad baby-sits.

Youngsters usually return to the place where they are born and some juveniles have been seen flying in the vicinity of the Alanton nest too. As the youngsters reach maturity at age 5, some of them also may return to the Lynnhaven River to nest.

Recently the river had a celebrity guest, Azalea, the young eagle from Norfolk Botanical Garden's nest that was equipped with a satellite-tracking device last year. Azalea was tracked to the Lynnhaven's Western Branch where she spent a night roosting in a tree in Little Neck and two nights behind Independence Middle School, Lukei said.



PHOTO BY: WILLIE KEE



PHOTO BY: WILLIE KEE

Eagle activity on the Lynnhaven reflects the growing population of bald eagles in Virginia Beach.

"In 2009 there were eight eagle nests in Virginia beach that we know about," Lukei said. "I suspect there are going to be many more because of the success rate of local bald eagles."

Bald eagles in Virginia have experienced a dramatic recovery from a low of 30 breeding pairs in the early 1970s to more than 610 pairs in 2009. The eagles have made a major comeback from the effects of DDT that decimated their numbers a half century ago. The eagle population has rebounded to the extent that our national symbol has been removed from the federal endangered species list.

And Lynnhaven River lovers are beginning to see the effects of the comeback.

To learn more about eagles in general visit [www.norfolkbotanicalgarden.org](http://www.norfolkbotanicalgarden.org). Click on Eagle Cam, which will take you to WVEC's live cam of the garden nest. To find out more about Azalea's movements, click on Eagle Track under Links and Resources.



# Tips to Remember: Rethinking our Lawns

- Use the correct turfgrass species. In full sun, use bermudagrass; in light shade, tall fescue, St. Augustinegrass or zoysiagrass.
- Adjust your care to the type of grass you are using.
- Raise your mower blades and cut at the right height.
- Bermudagrass will perform best at a height of 2" to 2½"; tall fescue, St. Augustinegrass and zoysiagrass at 3" to 4".
- Irrigate only as needed. Water deeply and infrequently.
- Early morning irrigation minimizes water loss and diseases.
- Maintain sharp mower blades and never remove more than 25% of turf with any one mowing.
- Recycle grass clippings by leaving mulched cuttings on your lawn.
- Be careful to identify pests and consider alternative control measures before applying any pesticides.
- Never apply fertilizer without first getting a soil test to determine what if anything is needed.
- A properly managed lawn should not require re-seeding each year.

There is more information available on our website under the River Resources tab or stop by our office at 1608 Pleasure House Road, Suite 108.



A healthy and vigorous landscape traps pollutants, prevents runoff, improves the air we breathe and can contribute significantly to healthy clean waterways. Gardening is also a healthy activity both physically and emotionally enjoyed by many people.



Many of you have made significant and important changes in your lawn care practices over the past few years to lessen your impact on the health of the Lynnhaven River. Even small changes made by many people can have a significant impact.

We hope you will be inspired by these stories of actions taken by your neighbors and will share your story in an upcoming newsletter.

### Dr. Peter Fisher

As a member of Lynnhaven River NOW's Landscape Practices Committee, I am well educated on the impact homeowners within the watershed have on the river's water quality. Over the past two years, I have made significant landscape alterations to reduce my yard's impact on the Lynnhaven. I live on the water and enhanced my buffer (the strip of land between where my lawn ends and the river begins) by increasing its size and removing a large area of non-native English Ivy and replacing it with mostly native plants. This will help filter rain water runoff, and the sediments and fertilizers it can carry, before it reaches the river. As well, I put a large rain garden in the front yard which will capture rain water runoff in a shallow depression in the middle of the garden so that it will not go into the street and down the drain where it ends up in the Lynnhaven. These landscape changes, as well as limited and intelligent use of lawn fertilizers, will help limit my impact on the river.

See the photos of Peter's rain garden under construction and his river-front buffer.



**Kevin and Kathi DuBois**

The gold award needs to go to this Kings Grant homeowner, Kevin DuBois.

I have reduced my lawn area and replaced it with native and wildlife beneficial plants, shrubs and trees. I recycle my leaves

and my neighbors' leaves to build a natural duff in my forested riparian buffer. I built a berm to redirect storm water runoff from the lawn into the riparian buffer for nutrient removal. I have also planted additional trees and shrubs in the riparian buffer along the river. I have removed bricks and debris from the shoreline and planted wetland shrubs. In addition, I have used compost to improve soil quality and reduce the need for watering and fertilizer. I also use rain barrels and porous piping to direct roof runoff to garden beds and into the soil instead of running over the lawn and into the street.

See the photo of the DuBois back yard buffer.

**Donna Dronza and Brenda Davidson**

We live on a one acre lot that fronts on Lake Smith. We feel so fortunate to be able to care for this one acre of land and since we moved here 14 years ago, we've focused on being as close to nature as possible. We have naturalized a large buffer zone along the water, reduced our lawn by increasing the area of planted beds, eliminated fertilizer and have a large compost pile. We have purchased two rain barrels from LRNow and have planted native plants throughout our landscape. We are also certified as a backyard wildlife habitat through the World Wildlife Federation.



See the photos of the water through one of their gardens and the beautiful heron, one example of the wildlife they have attracted to the yard.

**Dr. Thomas Hubbard**

I live on Linkhorn Bay and now we have gone over a year without fertilizer. Our grass looks as green and good as it ever has! I'm sure more time will start to show the effects, but I wonder if lots of lawns are being over fertilized if I can't even tell I stopped my fertilizer a year ago. Just a thought. Just this morning when talking to my sister visiting from the Midwest I talked to her about the disaster that fertilizer is to this beautiful water we are looking at—that there were once world famous oysters and crabs right in front of us and now they barely hold on for life simply because of this crazy fertilizer habit we got ourselves into.

Thank you. You are our heroes. Keep up the good work. I am sure there are more of you with a story to tell about the changes you have made. We would love to hear from you. Send your story to Karen at [kforget@lynnhaven2007.com](mailto:kforget@lynnhaven2007.com).

Some facts about lawns:

- Approximately 70% of American residential water is used for landscaping. The average lawn needs 10,000 gallons of water each summer.
- Lawnmowers use 800 million gallons of gas each year.
- The pollution emitted from a power mower in one hour is equal to the amount from the average car being driven 350 miles.
- Gas-powered lawn equipment produces as much as one-tenth of the smog-forming pollutants from all mobile sources.
- According to the Environmental Protection Agency, over 70 million pounds of pesticides are applied to lawns each year. That is ten times more per acre than the pesticides that are applied to agricultural crops.
- Between 40-60% of the nitrogen fertilizer applied to lawns ends up in surface and groundwater.
- Yard waste makes up over 50% of the nation's landfills.
- NASA photographs indicate 32 million acres of U.S. land are covered by lawns. This makes grass the nation's largest irrigated crop.
- Urban areas generate nine times more runoff than a woodland area of the same size.