

Webcam fans mourn Calif. bald eagle chick deaths

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(AP) -- The only bald eagle nest on Santa Cruz Island is now a lonely place, one that webcam viewers were delighted to monitor just a few weeks ago.

That was when two newly hatched chicks gave nature lovers across the nation the chance to witness the regrowth of a declining population on this set of islands off the Ventura County coast.

But that fascination lasted only a few days. The chicks died soon after hatching, leaving viewers to console each other on an Internet chat board hosted by the Nature Conservancy, a worldwide conservation organization.

Webcam viewers had been watching the nest since the mother eagle - K-26 - laid the first egg of the year in February. Half of the birds hatched in that nest have died in the past four years, including the latest death on April 14.

The Nature Conservancy launched the webcam in 2006 to enable online visitors to witness wild eagle nesting behavior - including the birth of the first wild-born bald eagle chicks on the Channel Islands in more than 50 years.

Since then, viewers have seen several devastating moments.

In 2007, viewers learned a chick they had watched grow until it could

leave the nest was killed by a car. And last year, another eagle swooped down and knocked two chicks out of the nest. They were later captured and rehabilitated.

Bald eagles have a high mortality rate in the their first year but generally have a good chance of survival after that, said Dave Garcelon, president of the Institute for Wildlife Studies based in Arcata, Calif.

There have been 61 bald eagles released in Channel Islands National Park in recent years. About 30 remain, and most have reached the age - about 5 - when they start to mate and build nests.

That means many more chicks could hatch in years to come, but for now webcam viewers are still coping with the latest tragedy.

"There has been an outpouring of emotion," Garcelon said. "When people are so into watching birds and something like this happens, they take it pretty hard."

Biologists do not know what killed the recently hatched chicks, but Garcelon said possibilities include disease or contaminates.

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