

# Eagles not flying with doves in Alaska island fishing town

July 8 2010, By Kyle Hopkins

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On a recent weekday, Allana Gustafson was pushing an empty mail cart outside the Dutch Harbor post office in Alaska when she heard the beating of wings like heavy breathing behind her.

Next came a sharp pain. A bald eagle nesting on the nearby cliff had swooped down and carved a rice grain-sized divot in her scalp, she said, leaving a bloody but superficial wound and serving as a reminder to eagle-ridden Unalaska: Don't turn your back on big, nesting birds.

Residents of the island fishing town reported at least two eagle attacks to police within the past two weeks, according to the Unalaska Department of Public Safety. One man said [eagles](#) dove at him three times this summer and police on Wednesday posted warning signs near high-traffic nesting areas where eagles are known to dive-bomb passersby.

One of the wide, white placards stands a few yards away from the post office like a high-voltage warning: "DANGER NESTING EAGLES." On the sign a silhouetted eagle swoops talons-first toward a picture of a person waving their hands in fear.

There's nothing mysterious about the attacks, which are reported year after year, said Unalaska police Sgt. Matt Betzen. Just birds protecting their nests.

"I think we had more swoops last year," he said.

Still, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service division chief for migratory bird management in Alaska is visiting Dutch Harbor this week. He'll review the situation and recommend what to do next, said Wildlife Service spokesman Larry Bell.

It's against federal law to kill, injure or move [bald eagles](#) under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. But people can apply for permits to kill or disturb eagles or move their nests under certain circumstances, such as threats to public safety.

Bald eagles can weigh up to 14 pounds and have wingspans of up to 8 feet, according to the Fish and Wildlife Service. They mate for life, typically enlarging the same nest each year in tree tops and cliffs, the agency says.

Sonia Handforth-Kome, executive director of the Iliuliuk Health Clinic, said a pair of eagles has nested across the street from the clinic since before she began working there nine years ago.

Last year they dove at people at least four times, she said. A woman on a bicycle was attacked twice in one day.

"Our board president got chased into the clinic," Handforth-Kome said, though she hasn't heard of the pair attacking anyone near the clinic this year.

Fish and Wildlife Service officials have said the birds are relatively passive toward people. Good news, considering the agency estimates there are 50,000 bald eagles in the state.

"Even when the bald eagle was listed as an endangered species in the lower 48, it was never listed in Alaska," said Bell, the Fish and Wildlife Service spokesman.

It was unclear Wednesday how many of those eagles can be found in Unalaska, but residents say the town is lousy with them.

Eagles can be seen at the dump and on Dumpsters, police said. Sitting on your car when you leave the house in the morning or standing sentinel on light posts. Handforth-Kome said you see them nesting in a derelict crane along the way to the airport or in a floating buoy near the small boat harbor.

"They're like rats around here," said Gustafson, who says she was attacked at about 11:30 on June 29 at the post office.

She'd seen the eagle staring at her from a light post when she drove up.

Her Dodge Magnum was the only car in the parking lot, which stands beneath a cliff where the pair of eagles nests each year.

The bird gave her an odd feeling when she pulled in, she said. "I don't know if you've ever looked into an eagle's eyes, but it's like they look through you."

Jim Touza said eagles at the post office swooped or harassed him three times in the past two weeks. "I got a cut in the back of the head. Knocked me down, actually," he said. "They're big birds."

Touza, who works as an expeditor for Icicle Seafoods, has a theory. The eagles only attack from behind he said, and have only bombed him when he's pushing a mail cart.

"They don't like the sound of the wheels," he said.

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