

Cal Fire burns next to Bald Eagle nest, eaglets die



by Defiance Canyon Raptor Rescue

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Bald eagle chick, dead in nest tree after Cal Fire control burn next to the nest in 2021. Cal Fire has not committed to stop burning by the nest this year. Who would think it would be a problem for public agencies to adhere to laws that protect wildlife?

Climate change impacts have been worsening for years, raising temperatures and exacerbating fire danger in California and the world. In many cases though, trees and other plants are being treated as enemies to be annihilated, rather than as the ecosystems that enable life on earth to exist.

In California, both Cal Fire and PG&E are being given exemptions from any environmental review for their “fuel reduction” or “vegetation management” programs. In this time when thousands of scientists worldwide are screaming and waving red flags about biodiversity and climate catastrophe, the impacts of these projects are being ignored, particularly to wildlife and habitat.

What has happened over the past several years to a bald eagle nest east of Red Bluff, California illustrates what is occurring because of these exemptions from any oversight. The fear of fire is being exploited to the detriment of the natural world, rather than substantive actions being implemented to reduce the emissions which are causing climate disaster.



Hwy 36, east of Red Bluff. The eagle nest is to the right (south side). This is the roadside Cal Fire has burned in 2020 and 2021 when the eagle nest was occupied. There is little reason to burn here, and many reasons not to.



The eagles' nest to the south of the highway, circled in red.



Parent eagle with young eaglet in front (little grey head) in nest tree. April 2022.

Local residents have been watching this nest since 2020. A photographer from Red Bluff was going out to the nest every day in 2021. At the end of May, the photographer saw a notice that there was going to be a control burn by the nest in a few days. She contacted a local eagle group, who called Cal Fire to tell them about the nest which was occupied by two young eaglets. The eagle group left a message and received a message back from Cal Fire saying their biologist said it was fine to be burning near the nest. The eagle group called back to get the biologist's name, but received no answer then or later. It wasn't "fine".

The burn was done on June 1st. This nest is approximately 100 feet down a ravine from the highway. The eaglets were probably only 6-7 weeks old, 4 or 5 weeks from being able to fly.

The photographer was standing next to the nest during the burn and taking photographs. The Cal Fire people were slightly to the east of the nest. The smoke and flames can be seen on the south side of the highway, on the same side as the nest.



Cal Fire burning next to eagle nest, 2021. How much extra CO₂ is being emitted by extra equipment use and burning unnecessarily?

The photographer went to check the nest a few days later and saw one adult perched above the nest, but could see no eaglets.

The next morning, the photographer took a photo which shows a dead eaglet hanging from the nest. The photographer contacted me (Marily Woodhouse from Defiance Canyon Raptor Rescue). We went to search for the other eaglet, in the hope it was still alive.



Dead eaglet hanging from the nest.

Both the adults were at the top of the tree, above the nest. I went down the ravine to the nest tree to walk around beneath it to search for the second eaglet and the adults stayed in the tree top. I walked to the southeast side of the tree and looked up and saw the other eaglet hanging dead in the tree, below the nest about 10'.



The second eaglet, dead below the nest.

We reported the deaths to US Fish and Wildlife and CA Department of Fish and Wildlife, but never received any notification of any action taken.

A State Wildlife Health Lab biologist wrote to us later that:

"A bird's respiratory system is more sensitive to toxins, including smoke, than a mammal's respiratory system. This is because birds have a higher oxygen demand than mammals and a bird's lungs are 10 times more efficient at capturing oxygen. The rapid efficiency of gas exchange in bird lungs makes them more susceptible to inhaled toxic agents, including smoke. Inhaled toxins, such as smoke, can cause irritation and damage the respiratory system. It also can compromise the immune system, making the bird more susceptible to infections. This is especially true in young birds in the nest that are unable to escape the smoke. Smoke inhalation toxicity in birds is caused by irritant gases (aldehydes, hydrogen chloride, and sulfur dioxide), particulate matter, and nonirritant gases (carbon monoxide, carbon dioxide, and hydrogen cyanide) released by combustion."

There was a burn done next to the Dales Station nest in 2020 also. I was called upon to rescue an eaglet who got out of the nest before he could fly that year. It was several days before the burn was done that year, so he was away from the nest when the burn occurred. His sister was still in the nest during the burn. I received a call from Dales Station, less than a mile from the nest, in August, 2020 about an eaglet who had been on the ground for 3 days, standing next to a shallow pool of Paynes Creek. My determination was that it was the female from the nest. She was open-mouthed breathing with a raspy noise. She died a few hours after she was caught and transported. The Wildlife Lab report said: "This was a juvenile female in poor nutritional condition with no fat reserves and minimal pectoral muscle development. Internally, there was evidence of an extensive infection. The visible infection resembled avian tuberculosis which is caused by the bacterium *Mycobacterium avium*. It's widespread in the environment in soil and dust and is usually an opportunistic infection. Depending on where the lesions are in the bird, gives an idea of how it entered the body. The lesions in this bird were primarily in the air sacs suggesting it was inhaled."

The male who had been in care was released in 2020. A first year eagle was seen back at the nest in 2021. Judging by his and the adults' behavior, it was the male who was in care away from the nest during the burn in 2020.



2020 bald eaglet being released. He was away from the nest in rehab care during Cal Fire's control burn in 2020, which probably saved his life.

I had occasion to contact Cal Fire in February 2022 about another issue. I had just been informed that the Dales Station bald eagle nest was occupied, so mentioned it in the hope of preventing another burn next to the nest. Cal Fire and its employees are public servants. It is their job to uphold state and federal laws, which include protection of wildlife, but the answer from a Cal Fire employee contained only dismissive, condescending remarks, clearly refusing to take steps to ensure any protections were implemented.

Many letters, calls, and emails have ensued since February (most unanswered). I made maps from Cal Fire's own fire database showing how rarely the area around the nest has burned. The ravine area there is extremely rocky and is grazed by cattle. And then there are the State and Federal laws that protect nesting birds. Still, Cal Fire will not commit to refrain from burning by the nest again this year.

Last week a biologist from a PG&E contractor company working in Greenville (a town that burned in the Dixie fire last year) called Raptor Rescue because they wanted us to take eggs from a nest in a tree they wanted to cut down. I explained the multitude of reasons that was a bad idea, along with it being illegal for them to do. The man said "We have an exemption". How many nesting birds are being destroyed in California due to these stupid, thoughtless exemptions and the complete lack of oversight which is occurring?

There have got to be protections enforced. Apparently that won't happen without widespread public outrage.

Here are some state employees to contact if you will help tell them there is a problem with their practices:

George Morris, Cal Fire Northern Region Unit Chief (530) 224-2445 (They would not give out his email address)

Dave Russell, Cal Fire Tehama/Glenn Unit Chief (530) 528-5199 dave.russell@fire.ca.gov

Tina Bartlett, Regional Manager CDFW, (530) 225-2300 tina.bartlett@wildlife.ca.gov

People often focus on individual species, but we believe every species is important, whether it is on a man-made list or not. Habitat fragmentation and loss have significant impacts on wildlife. Defiance Canyon Raptor Rescue works to rescue, rehabilitate, and return raptors to their wild lives, along with our work to protect watersheds and forests of California.

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