



# NATURE'S ART

## WILDLIFE JOURNAL

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### Life on the River

#### Comments by the Editor

Being near water, whether it be a river, a lake, or the ocean, has always been an inspiration. I cannot recall a time in my life where I have not lived near the water. Even as a child, I would sit along side the shore, and gazing out, allow my imagination to take hold. Sitting there quietly, observing and experiencing, there was always so much life, wildlife, all around me.

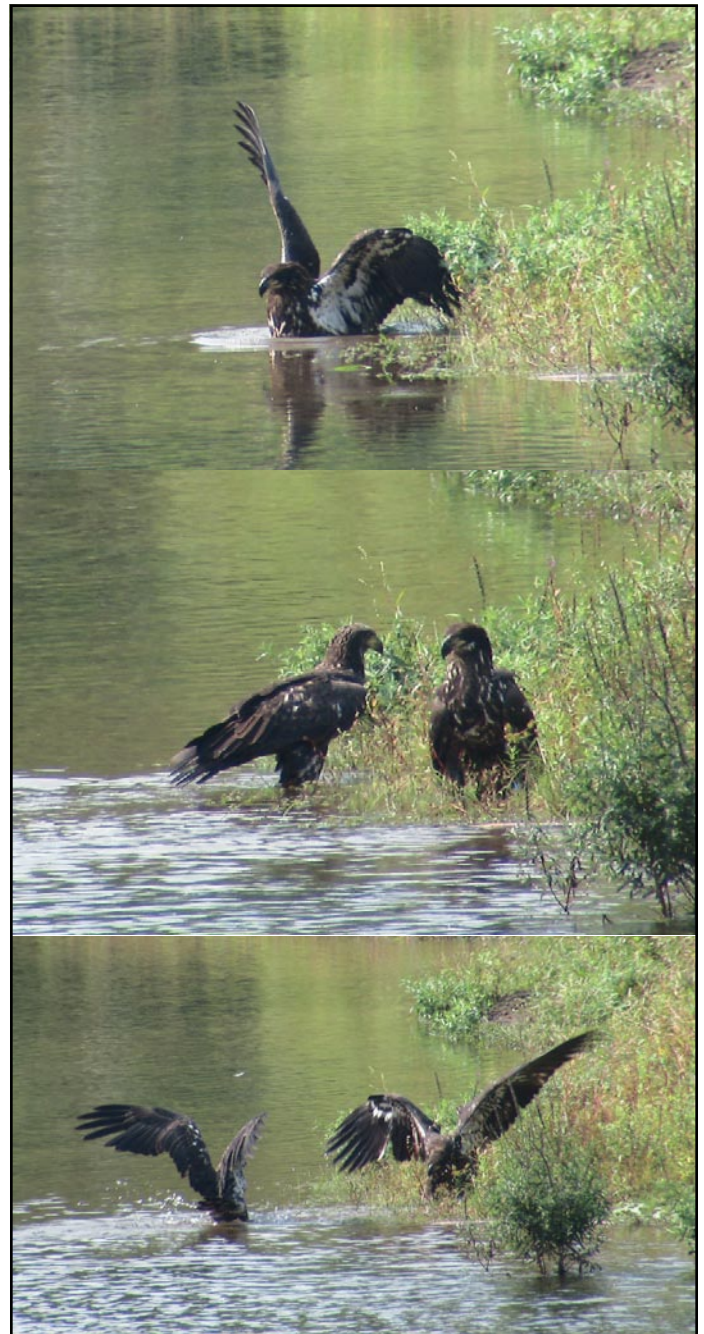
Now having a house along the Delaware River has allowed my husband, John, and I to continue exploring and documenting our wildlife experiences. Real family struggles, triumphs and tragedies play out in front of us, along the banks of the Delaware River.

The Wildlife Journal is committed to raising awareness and understanding of the wildlife and environment of our area, and the issues impacting them. Our current issue features some of these family triumphs and inspirations experienced as part of river life.

Yoke Bauer DiGiorgio

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At 20 weeks, young eagles return to the "nest tree" area and join their parents to enjoy the Delaware River on a hot September afternoon. Both adults are perched on branches above.



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## Ribbon of Beauty

by Mary Greene

*Mary Greene is the founder and director of the Upper Delaware Writers Collective. She has lived in Narrowsburg, NY for many years.*

During the summers here by the Upper Delaware River, I have spent many wondrous hours with a snorkel and mask swimming along the surface of the river, watching its depths. The clarity of the water on certain calm mornings, and the sudden and rapid changing depth of the river bottom, made for exciting appearances of large smooth rocks and stretches overrun with underwater greenery. Occasionally small and large fish would appear. One day I spotted a beautiful underwater snake gliding muscularly along—but it was too broad and flat in the body, too thick to be a snake. I had spotted an American eel.

The American eel begins life in the Saragasso Sea, which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife service describes as a “two-million-square-mile warm-water lens in the North Atlantic.” Although it begins life in the salty sea, the eel spends years traveling to fresh water lakes, estuaries, rivers and streams, where it will mature and live for some five to twenty years before making a return trip to the ocean to spawn

and die. The sexually mature eel, which can grow to several feet for males and up to five feet for females, begins its journey back to the sea during chilly autumn nights, traversing deep grass patches and shallow ditches toward a January spawning in the warm Sargasso.

American eel populations have suffered as a result of the creation of dams and other obstructions, hydropower plants and over fishing. For a while, they were under consideration for inclusion on the endangered species list, but a U.S. Fish and Wildlife report released in January 2007, based upon an extensive study of eel populations from the Great Lakes to Brazil, concluded that the American eel was not endangered.

What struck me during my brief sighting of *Anguilla rostrata* in the Delaware—a moment I have never forgotten—was its beauty. The American eel may look rather creepy and dull while on land, but underwater, it is an elegant swimmer. It undulated in a slow, unhurried pattern, contracting and expanding like a great silvery-bronze ribbon against the green water. I tried to follow, but it was gone in a flash of golden grace.

## A River Poem

by Mort Malkin

*Mort Malkin, a resident of Milanville, PA has published his poems in many literary, medical and lay journals and has spoken at many poetry workshops.*

I have seen beauty  
that arrests the breath:

Once, Mont Blanc above  
a clear lake that wears

a ring of vineyards.  
Then, the gemset isles

of the Grenadines-  
the Tobago Cays.

But now, I have found  
another place, one

I can call home, here  
in the valley of

the High Delaware,  
where the scale is close

and personal. Here  
I can leave every

restiveness to a  
river of ever

changing energy,  
of whim and caprice.

# Learning to Fly and Fish

by Yoke Bauer DiGiorgio

*Yoke Bauer DiGiorgio and her husband, John , established Nature's Art LLC and are dedicated to promoting awareness and understanding of the beauty and heritage of our wildlife through photography, documentary video, writings and the events they organize.*

Observing and documenting over the past eighteen months, a first year eagle pair building their nest along the Delaware River and raising their first offspring, has been a wonderful experience. Eagles are terrific parents. John and I were particularly interested in what happens to young eagles once they fledge (first flight). Difficult to observe and identify, we were fortunate to be able to continue to do just that as the family continued to remain in the "nest tree" area.

Prior to fledging, usually about 9-10 weeks, eagle chicks will practice exercising flight muscles and learning to control lift in preparation for their first flights. This usually includes taking to the support branches of their nest. It is said to strengthen their legs and improve their balance. Although they are adult size and their tails are almost completely grown, their longest primary flight feathers are still not fully developed.

It may take up to 5 weeks from the time young eagles leave the nest until their flight feathers are completely formed. The feathers are still developing at this stage. The tip of the feather develops first and the base is the last to develop. Until the feather is completely grown, the shaft or quill, which is filled with blood during growth, is soft, quite delicate, and is not firmly attached to the underlining wing bones. It will take an additional week for the blood to leave the shafts of the feathers and the feathers to become firmly attached to the underlying bone. When the wings are finally grown, they will extend to within one inch of the tip of the tail. They are now able to withstand a lot more pressure and the young eagle is ready for vigorous flight.

Some young eagles leave the nest accidentally - being blown over or falling out. Nests have also been blown out of trees during violent storms. The nest, we were observing and documenting was located in a white pine 120 feet up and in a very windy area along the Delaware River. But "our" two young eagles did not experience such an accident and were very attached to their home. In fact, some parental coaxing would be necessary to get them to leave. We began to see that the parents did not bring food to the nest, but rather perched on a nearby branch with enticement. The begging calls of the two young became screams as they darted from one edge



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At 14 weeks, young eagles perch on branch in the "nest tree" area and wait for the adults to bring food. Adult female flies in with a fish. First one (dominant), and then the other, young eagle will feed on the fish.

of the nest to the other and out onto their home tree's branches.

Young eagles will typically continue to depend on the adults for food for several weeks after fledging, although feeding may take place away from the nest. It is during the 4-6 week period after fledging that they develop muscle strength, improve flying skills and learn to fish.

The moment of fledging came unexpectedly. A cool mid-July morning and a sudden gust of wind knocked the first into the air. As it is natural for eagle fledglings, it glided to one of the nearby trees it had seen its parents on in the

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## **Learning to Fly and Fish**

past few months. The second followed shortly thereafter. "Our" two young eagles were 12 weeks old.

The first two weeks they remained very close to the nest and area around the "nest tree". We watched as they practiced flying, sometimes crashing into trees and sometimes into one another. In one instance, one crashed into a branch of nearby white pine. Although the branch was substantial in size, it cracked and broke off from the force of impact. The young eagle, while sliding down, was able to grab at another branch and stop the fall. In another instance, one attempted to fly onto a branch but couldn't quite keep his/her balance and ended up hanging upside down. After what felt like quite a long time, he/she was able to let go of the branch and maneuver him(her)self upright and flew away. There was always much flapping of wings, and feathers flying in the air, as the young eagles struggled to right themselves.

One morning we observed one of the young eagles was perched next to the adult female on her favorite roosting branch. The second flew in to join them but didn't quite make a smooth landing. He/she crashed into the adult female, knocking her off the branch. The branch shook and both young eagles struggled to maintain their balance. In the mean time, the adult female flew around the tree, back to the branch and pushing the second off, resumed her position on the branch - a definite lesson not to mess with mom.

The parents remained near and continued to bring food daily, either directly to the young, being guided by their hunger calls, or to the nest to which the young would quickly come from a nearby tree. The young were still totally dependent on their parents for food. But every day their wings were stronger; their soaring flight took them higher and farther.

It was the end of August and we had not yet observed the young attempting to fish on their own. We did observe that the parents, the female in particular, had begun to delay the feeding times. Instead, she would attempt to coax the young, sometimes pushing them off a branch, to join her as she fished in the river. There were times when they joined her. There were times when they remained on their branch near the "nest tree", sometimes side by side, their begging calls becoming loud demanding screams.

The parents however, were dedicated and continued their lessons. It was mid-afternoon on a hot August day and we observed the female fly to where both young were perched on a branch along the river. She landed on the nearby shore just below them, spent ten minutes bathing herself in the water and flew back to her favorite



©2007 Photographs by John and Yoke DiGiorgio

At 14 weeks, one of the young eagles has a first encounter with a great blue heron, defends its territory and ultimately drives off the heron. At 15 weeks, one young eagle perches on limb in the "nest tree" area.

roosting branch. Immediately thereafter, one of the young followed her example and also bathed in the river (the first time we had observed this behavior). Since that time, both young have cooled themselves off in the river many times.

Early September, the young eagles were 18 weeks old. The adults were spending less and less time near the young. We observed, for the first time, that one young had a fish in its talons as he/she flew to a branch near the nest tree and began to feed. Although both young eagles had hatched within several days of one another, one was always more advanced than the other. This was true even in flying after fledging. So it did not surprise us that it took two more weeks before it appeared that the second was now also beginning to fish.

"Our" young eagles were growing into adults as planned. We were delighted to observe that even as late as 20 weeks (eight weeks after fledging), the two young eagles and the adults still joined together as a family along the shores of the Delaware River.

# TWINS ARRIVE

by Yoke Bauer DiGiorgio

*Yoke Bauer DiGiorgio and her husband, John, established Nature's Art LLC and are dedicated to promoting awareness and understanding of the beauty and heritage of our wildlife through photography, documentary video, writings and the events they organize.*

It was an early chilly spring morning, the mist still hanging low. I stood on my deck, coffee in hand, looking out over the river as I do most mornings. But today would be different. Looking out and enjoying the quiet, I didn't see it at first. Then glancing down I noticed a tiny reddish brown form in the vegetation under the pines below. Looking more closely, hidden, there was a newborn fawn.

From mid-May to mid-June most healthy whitetail does give birth to their families. Fawns weigh 6-10 lbs at birth. Even though fawns may stand within minutes of birth, their speed and agility are not adequate to outrun most predators until they are about three weeks old. Therefore, does will "leave" newborn fawns to spend almost all of their time bedded in secretive locations returning to feed them once or twice a day. Although newborn fawns may start to eat vegetation within a few days of birth, they will not be able to properly digest the plant matter till they are about two weeks old. So, lying silently for hours at a time, not to attract predators, newborn fawns are able to rest, grow and become stronger.

When food is abundant and the previous winter not too harsh, does in the prime of life (4-9 years old) will typically give birth to twins. When "left" by the doe, twin fawns are separated which serves to further protect them. Knowing this, I looked about to see if there was a second fawn. Sure enough, a second fawn, lie hidden under the vegetation of another nearby pine. The twins remained hidden under the pines all day, occasionally standing to stretch



Newborn twins bedded down separately under the pines.

(C) 2007 John A. DiGiorgio, Photographer

or change position.

The sun was beginning to set, when the doe returned. Walking along the banks of the river, she stopped just below our deck and the pines. There came a pattering of foot steps as the first and then the second fawn ran to their mother. Quivering with excitement they touched noses with her. The first, and later the second, then stepped around to her side to nurse. After a few minutes the doe stepped away and spent time licking and grooming them. She then led both of them a short distance to a

stream which feeds into the river. The doe quenched her thirst while the fawns explored the cool clear water. It was getting dark and the family disappeared into the tall vegetation along the river bank. The twins were returned to the pines by our deck each morning for the next two weeks.

Play serves to strengthen a fawn's muscles and build up its stamina, and increases its chances of out maneuvering predators. While under the doe's careful watch, the twins would playfully run back and forth,

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# DISCOVERING NATURE



(Top) First newborn twin greeting its mother at end of day; (Bottom) twins now almost one month join their mother during her excursions; and twins at two months explore the river bank with their mother hidden in the brush.

©2007 Photographs by John and Yoke DiGiorgio

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zigzagging and occasionally bucking. Spring turned to summer and the twins continued to grow and develop. They joined their mother in her feeding excursions. They became excellent swimmers, even swimming across the river. One twin visibly grew larger than the other. All the while, the doe was always near and provided a careful watch over them.

It is now autumn and the fawns are no longer nursing. Soon the doe will molt from her reddish brown summer coat to her grayish brown winter coat. The twins will lose their white spots and will come to resemble their mother. Their bouts of playful activity will disappear as they assume the more sedate mature attitudes of the adult deer. A new generation has been raised - learning the ways of nature in order to prepare them for their survival.

## THE WILDLIFE JOURNAL

IS DEDICATED TO PROMOTING AWARENESS AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE BEAUTY AND HERITAGE OF OUR WILDLIFE.

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