



Ground-nesting Bald Eagle in the Strait of Georgia, British Columbia

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Nest sites are an important component of the ecology of the Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) throughout its range in North America. Bald Eagle nests are built principally in large trees, living and dead, with good flight access and unobstructed visibility of the surrounding area (Buehler 2000). In areas without trees, nests may be placed on the ground on small offshore islands, cliffs, sea stacks, atop pinnacles of rock, or on prominent ridges (Bent 1961, Hines and Lipke 1991, Curnutt and Robertson 1994). Such nest sites have limited ground access for potential predators (Sherrod et al. 1976).

In coastal British Columbia, 99% (n=511) of Bald Eagle nests reported between 1911 and 1989 were found in large trees, mainly living and coniferous. Four ground nests, in different years, have been reported in the province. All were atop rock pinnacles on Triangle Island, a large treeless seabird colony off the northwest tip of Vancouver Island. One additional ground nest was located on a cliff ledge (Campbell et al. 1990).

On 15 May 2010, I visited Vivian Island, BC (UTM 10U E377676 N5522365) with a friend, to check for nesting seabirds. The island is situated west of Powell River on the northeast side of the Strait of Georgia immediately west of the south tip of Harwood Island (UTM 10U 377676E 5522365N). Vivian Island is low, rocky, treeless, about 10 m high, and covered on top with dense patches of tall grasses growing between rock outcrops (Figure 1).

An incubating adult was flushed from the ground near the top of the island. The nest contained a single rough-shelled egg that was a dull, non-glossy white in colour without markings (Figure 2). The egg shape was rounded-oval. The nest itself was a loose collection of grass stems and rootlets measuring about 1.1 metres in diameter. It also

contained a few eagle contour and down feathers (Figure 2). Unlike other Bald Eagle ground nests found on marine islands, no driftwood, seaweed, or kelp was used for construction (see Sherrod et al. 1976).



Figure 1. Tall grass habitat and location of ground nest of Bald Eagle. *Photo by Clyde H. Burton, Vivian Island, BC, 15 May 2010. BC Photo 3741a (see Campbell and Stirling 1971).*

On 16 June 2010, I re-visited the island and found the Bald Eagle nest was empty but contained a few scattered eggshell fragments. The vegetation immediately around the nest had been heavily trampled, probably by humans. No adult eagles were present. Vivian Island is a popular site to stop and explore by boaters and in recent years their disturbance has caused the abandonment of nesting seabirds.

Finding the ground nest was unexpected because the Bald Eagle is only known to nest in trees throughout the Strait of Georgia (Campbell et al. 1990). In addition, at least four pairs nest on the forested perimeter of nearby Harwood Island (R.W. Campbell pers. comm.).

While this discovery may be an isolated incident, the potential for finding other Bald Eagle nests on treeless marine islands exists. †



Figure 2. Bald Eagle ground nest, constructed of grass stems and rootlets, containing a single egg. Photo by Clyde H. Burton, Vivian Island, BC, 15 May 2010. BC Photo 3741b.

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About the author

As a youngster growing up in Newfoundland, Clyde first became interested in wildlife through raising young birds, from the size of Arctic Terns to Northern Gannets and Bald Eagles. After his teens, he left home and took business training in Quebec and later obtained a pilot's license.

In 1969, he moved to Powell River, BC, where he was employed by the town's Parks Department until retirement. He quickly established a wildlife sanctuary at Cranberry Lake where he initiated a rehabilitation program for animals, raised wild ducks from eggs for release locally, and was the province's first volunteer to band Trumpeter Swans. During 14 years at the lake, he successfully treated and released 18 Bald Eagles back into the wild. He kept an additional pair of eagles that were too injured to be released. These birds successfully raised several broods in ensuing years.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Clyde provided the only information on birds for the Powell River region for *The Birds of BC* project.