



Outdoors: Dead eagles evidence of an ill wind



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Less than 50 years ago, the bald eagle population in Ohio amounted to just four nesting pairs.

Throughout the lower 48 states, the bald eagle numbers had fallen to a mere 500 nesting pairs.

This proud and powerful symbol of our nation was flirting with extinction primarily due to habitat loss and the destructive impact of toxic pesticides that worked their way up the food chain and thinned the eagles' eggshells, causing them to crack before the chicks could develop.

So an all-hands-on-deck effort got underway to save the bald eagle, protect its nesting areas, ban the killer pesticides, and provide it extensive protection under the Endangered Species Act. A slow, methodical comeback started, and decades later, bald eagles again displayed their majesty aloft. Ohio counted more than 800 nesting pairs in the most recent eagle survey.

But a new threat emerged during this historic recovery as wind turbines began to dot the landscape, placed by green energy projects that were fed by arteries flowing rich with taxpayer dollars as federal subsidies, grants, and tax breaks. When the whirling blades on these massive towers started knocking birds, bats, and eagles out of the sky at what conservationists called an alarming rate, the wind power lobby bumped heads with the bird advocates.

There have been court battles, energized grassroots activists packed county commission and township trustees meetings, yard signs sprouted across the rural countryside, and the lobbying has been intense. But most of the wind energy projects were anemically thin on solid research and data that addressed just what their ultimate impact would be on the creatures who had already staked their claim to the airspace.

While avian biologists and bird conservationists insisted that these projects, some involving hundreds of the huge turbine towers, be delayed until detailed studies could be completed, wind power advocates slammed on the throttle and used the green energy cape as their jet pack. They questioned or ridiculed the “science” that was the foundation of the conservationists' concerns, which most often focused on the placement or siting of the turbines, not on questions about their long-term viability as an energy source.

As expected, consultants paid by the developers consistently dismissed the claims of the avian conservationists. They repeatedly stated that worries over bird, bat, or bald eagle strikes were exaggerated and not realistic.

Then last week, one wind power developer finally fessed up. And while the corpse count stunned many, the bird advocates experienced a melancholic moment of vindication.

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ESI Energy pleaded guilty to killing 136 bald eagles and golden eagles, admitting that the birds had been struck by its wind turbine blades and the resulting blunt force trauma was fatal. In the settlement of the case, ESI “acknowledged that at least 150 bald and golden eagles have died in total” at its 50 U.S. facilities since 2012, federal prosecutors said, and that the shocking body count included no less than 136 deaths that were “affirmatively determined to be attributable to the eagle being struck by a wind turbine blade.”

“We have said all along that this was going to happen again and again, that when these turbines were placed in bald eagle habitat or right in the migratory path of birds, there would be a lot of kills,” said Mark Shieldcastle, research director at Black Swamp Bird Observatory along Lake Erie and a retired avian biologist who spent more than 30 years with the Ohio Division of Wildlife.

“I think in this case the wind turbine company just got caught with their hand in the cookie jar and since everything was documented, there was no getting out of it. This one case just illustrates how much this is happening.”

The prosecutors in the ESI case said the bald eagles and golden eagles were killed at ESI facilities in New Mexico or Wyoming. In the plea bargain settlement, ESI agreed to pay a fine of nearly \$1.9 million along with \$6.2 million in restitution. The deal also included up to \$27 million to be used to limit future eagle deaths at ESI wind turbine sites.

“To me, this is just a slap on the wrist, just pocket change to them, and they’ll no doubt pass those costs along to the consumer,” Shieldcastle said.

“This is just a marketing ploy to make them look better. The truth is, they just don't care about dead eagles.”

In January, the USGS reported that there are more than 70,800 wind turbines in use in the United States, with more being added every week. Chris Aichholz lives in rural Seneca County and enjoyed seeing bald eagles return to the area and nest about a mile from his home. When a wind turbine project proposed placing more than 80 towers across the surrounding farmland, with some of those stretching 650 feet high, Aichholz did his homework and became an activist.

“It is good to finally see some action being taken against one of these wind companies, but we have to remind ourselves that this is just one case — it is scary to think about how many eagles are killed and never documented,” he said. “We fought for so long to bring the bald eagles back from extinction, and now it seems like the wind companies just disregard that. They see the green energy label as a right to kill as many as necessary.”

A proposed project that could eventually place 1,500 massive wind turbine towers out in Lake Erie has been the subject of intense debate and lobbying here in Ohio. In the past, the American Bird Conservancy and Black Swamp Bird Observatory filed a document with the Ohio Power Siting Board — the entity that has to approve the location of wind turbine projects — calling Icebreaker Wind an “ill-conceived” project that poses a devastating threat to “one of the world's greatest confluences of migratory birds and bats.”

The conservation groups cited a 2012 study that found an estimated 573,000 birds and 888,000 bats are killed annually by wind turbines, and that the Altamont Pass wind turbine farm in California alone had killed more than 2,000 golden eagles.

John Lipaj, a board member of the Lake Erie Foundation which has actively opposed the Icebreaker Wind project on both environmental and economic grounds, said the location of such wind turbine arrays is the key.

“We support the pursuit of clean and renewable energy, but we feel that Lake Erie is just too precious a resource to just be winging it and pushing ahead with a project of this magnitude without a full, comprehensive environmental impact study being completed first,” Lipaj said. “There is no technology, no way to count dead eagles and birds out over the water. The research they've done for this project is inadequate.”

Lipaj also pointed out that the driving force behind the Icebreaker Wind project, Fred. Olsen Renewables, is based in Norway and could receive \$53

million in grants from U.S. taxpayers, plus additional millions in tax breaks if the proposed wind turbine array out on the lake is completed.

“And they've said that if they don't get these monies, then they are not interested in moving forward with the project, so that begs the question: are they in it for clean energy, or are they in it for the money?”

Aichholz said that he, too, does not oppose green energy, but whether it is in Wyoming, New Mexico, California, or Ohio, wind turbines should never be placed in bald eagle habitat or in the migratory pathway of millions of birds.

“You see an eagle fly overhead and you always stop and watch, and just enjoy what an amazing thing that is to experience,” he said. “But when these wind turbines go up in the worst possible locations, it's almost like these wind companies got a hunting permit to start killing bald eagles. It just makes no sense.”

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