

Watching them soar



FILE PHOTO

Story by Marci Dieht

IT'S NOT OFTEN THAT MY SONS ASK ME for help these days—they're grown now and long out of the nest. But if one of them needs me, I'm quick to respond like any good mother. So when my son Colin asked me for a lift to his mechanic on Sandhill Road near Canandaigua Academy, I was happy to spend time with one of my favorite people. I never expected to see something so magnificent on the way.

Turning near the garage, I spotted a group of crows sitting in a field, forming a ring around something huge in their midst. It was obviously a stand-off. I stopped the car.

"What the heck is *that*?" I asked Colin.

"That's a bald eagle," he said.

I trusted Colin's 20/20 vision—not to mention the fact that he's a wildlife and wetlands biologist. I looked closer and saw the white head and tail of a mature bald eagle. It dwarfed the crow posse.

But what was it doing there? Colin said the crows probably mobbed it, and they all were worn-out and resting, deciding what to do next. That's one of the things I love about Colin: I learn so much from him. Since he was a little boy, he's been passionate about the natural world and its adventures—though some of his own have strained

this mother's nervous system. He spent two summers in the Adirondacks at a biological field station so remote you had to take a boat to get to it. After graduating from FLCC and then SUNY College of Environmental Sciences & Forestry at Syracuse, he did field studies in Wyoming—among quicksand and rattlesnakes. He did another rattlesnake study back in New York state.

This sighting was a first for me in Canandaigua. I wondered: Is the bald eagle making a comeback in the Finger Lakes?

Once, of course, bald eagles were commonplace in this country. But by the early 1960s, they were endangered, with fewer than 500 pairs. According to the New York state Department of Environmental Conservation, the mass shooting of eagles, pesticides on crops, destruction of habitat and contamination of waterways and food sources all played a role. By the early 1970s, bald eagles were gone from New York state.

Enter Mike Allen, senior wildlife technician for the state's Bureau of Wildlife. Mike is the DEC's "eagle guy" and has been working for more than 30 years in the state's first-ever program to bring the bald eagle back to New York.

Between 1976 and 1989, about 200 nestling bald eagles were brought to New York (mostly from Alaska) and raised in a method called "hacking"—hand-raised from behind a blind until

they could live in the wild. The program has been a great success; up to 188 young eagles were born in one year. Each year, New York's bald eagles raise about 10 percent more young than the previous year.

So yes, Mike says, the bald eagle is making a comeback here, though human activity still threatens them.

Colin and I watched the eagle's standoff with the crows for a while. Then, one by one, the crows flew away, leaving the eagle alone in the field. It lifted off and flew straight toward us. Until you've been in the shadow of that immense wingspan, there's no way to describe the power and beauty of our national symbol in its element.

It banked and climbed high into the sky, soaring in widening circles before flying away to the east.

I turned to look at my smiling son. It hasn't always been an easy flight for him or his brothers in leaving home and doing what they love. But I'm watching them soar in their lives as men, husbands and fathers.

I found myself praying that they and their little "fledglings" will always have eagles to watch for inspiration, right here in the Finger Lakes and beyond. ■