



ATTACHMENT #1

United States
Department of
Agriculture

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Animal and
Plant Health
Inspection
Service

Jeannie Johnson
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Wildlife
Services

Alaska
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Dear Jeannie,

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Bald eagles have long been a “fixture” at the Juneau International Airport (JNU) due to their abundance in the area and the presence of a nesting pair in the float pond woodland over the last 10 years. We are all aware that many people enjoy using the airport’s emergency vehicle access road for the easy opportunities to view eagles close up in the trees and along the river. However, eagles present one of the greatest risks to aircraft safety when they share the same airspace. In a recent report, bald eagles ranked near the top of all wildlife species nationwide in risk to aircraft. This is based on the fact that when they are struck, a higher percentage of the strikes result in damage (something that is not true of many of the smaller species of birds that are struck here in Juneau).

The management of bald eagles is governed by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940. Under this Act, the airport holds a Bald Eagle Depredation permit that allows for the harassment of eagles to alleviate wildlife hazards. Recently, this Act underwent a revision and the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS) has issued a new set of rules allowing for the removal of nests at airports when they are considered a threat to aircraft safety. We believe it is in the best interest of aircraft safety here at JNU to seek permission from USFWS to remove the one known nest and any new nests that this or other pairs may try to establish on airport property. As there are likely to be questions regarding this recommendation, we’d like to try to answer a few of them for you.

How is a bald eagle nest a threat to aircraft safety? The nest itself is not a threat. However, the nesting behavior of the adult pair, along with any juvenile bald eagles that appear later in the nesting season present a unique threat to aircraft. The territoriality of the pair, frequent flights across the flight line when carrying nesting material and food for the young, and the subsequent appearance of “naïve” young eagles in the aircraft environment contribute to a higher probability of these birds being struck. Since the nest site becomes the focal point for these activities, removing the nest helps disrupt their behavior. Ultimately, along with other intensified harassment efforts, the goal is to get the nesting pair to move off airport.



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Why, after 10 years, ask the USFWS for permission now? A new set of rules under the Bald & Golden Eagle Protection Act just recently went into effect (Sept. 2009) allowing the legal removal of nests at airports for safety reasons. The removal of a bald eagle nest for safety concerns was not authorized prior to this.

Won't this or another pair attempt to build another nest anyway? Future attempts to build another nest may occur. Once the current nest is removed, constant detection and harassment efforts will be imperative in persuading pairs of eagles to find suitable nesting habitat off airport. A number of wooded areas and trees are currently being removed for airport development purposes. Hopefully, this will make it less likely for new nest trees to become established.

Will removing the nest tree eliminate the threat of bald eagle strikes at Juneau? No. However, it will reduce the threat by ensuring that nesting behavior and juveniles eagles are not in such close proximity to the flight line.

Doesn't a nesting pair of eagles help keep other eagles off the airport? This has not been our experience here at JNU. As recently as May of this year, up to 100 eagles were drawn onto the airport to feed on capelin, a small fish, in the Mendenhall River. This event presented an extreme hazard to aircraft safety during a time when the resident pair of eagles was actively nesting.

How many strikes have been documented with eagles at the airport? Two strikes with bald eagles have been documented at JNU, one of which occurred during nesting season.

For this action to have the desired effect, namely eliminating the potential of nesting eagles as a hazard to aircraft, it will take a combination of timing and vigilance on the part of the airport. The nest tree must be removed well in advance of nesting season so that the pair has time to successfully establish a new territory off the airport. In order to make the pair want to leave the airport, it will take increased vigilance on the part of all wildlife control personnel at the airport. Wildlife control personnel must harass eagles at every opportunity when sighted in the float pond woodland, and extra effort must be made to dissuade the pair from establishing a new nest site in the woodland. This will in all likelihood require removing other trees as they begin building new nests. We believe this to be a reasonable and achievable goal.

The airport should contact the USFWS and apply for an Eagle Nest Take permit to remove the current nest now, and remove any new additional nests in the future. This application should be provided to the USFWS as soon as possible to give their personnel adequate time to process the necessary paperwork. This is somewhat new territory for USFWS and we anticipate questions and some "back and forth" before a permit is issued. We would be happy to help with completion of the application, or in any way to facilitate this request. Please let us know if you have any questions regarding this recommendation.

Sincerely,

William F. Wilmoth

William F. Wilmoth
Wildlife Biologist
Wildlife Services – Alaska

Cc: Jerry Mahle