

Troy Hattemer's photo of a bald eagle was selected from more than 2,000 entries for Wisconsin's new endangered species license plate.

Talon a great story



TROY HATTEMER

BALD EAGLE LICENSE PLATE CELEBRATES A COMEBACK AND RAISES FUNDING FOR ENDANGERED RESOURCES.

Lisa Gaumnitz

Glory was in all of his glory.

The 14-year-old bald eagle perched on the gloved arm of his trainer, Diane Visty, along a small lake at the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Milwaukee.

It was time for his photo shoot to help promote a new Wisconsin specialty license plate to raise money for rare species and natural areas.

As the photographer started snapping away, Glory extended his wings to nearly their full 7.5-foot wingspan.

Visty's hair fanned out in the backdraft

and she took several small steps to counter the bird's movement as its wings beat the air and its talons dug into the glove.

It was a good reminder of who was the star that day and why.

"People like eagles because they are so awesome and powerful and exciting for people to see up close," Visty says. "For us as educators, we can talk to children about things we can do right in nature."

"When I was growing up, we didn't see eagles. We were down to 400 eagles in the lower 48 states in the 1970s but we figured out the cause of decline. We figured out something to fix it, and we succeeded. That is very powerful to be able to tell fourth graders."

That conservation success story and

its message of hope for the future is getting a powerful wind beneath its wings this fall with the help of Glory, Visty and many others across the state.

Hopes soar for plate sales, conservation action

The new eagle design, fledged in August, offers Wisconsinites a fantastic-looking license plate to display on their cars and the opportunity to make a difference for the wildlife and special places they love, says Erin Crain, who leads the DNR's Natural Heritage Conservation program.

Sale of each plate brings a \$25 annual donation to the Endangered Resources Fund, which pays for work by Natural Heritage Conservation staff and partners to protect, manage and restore Wisconsin's nongame animals, native plants and 673 natural areas. These gems harbor rare species and preserve unique geological formations, archeological sites and the best remaining examples of prairies, savannas, wetlands and



Glory, a bald eagle with the raptor program at Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in Milwaukee, was on hand for the Aug. 5 unveiling of the new eagle license plate. Above right: Hattemer shows a sample plate featuring his photo while Glory looks on after the Aug. 5 event at Prairie du Sac.

old-growth forests in Wisconsin. Plate revenues are a key ingredient in the mix of grants, donations and plate sales that pay for such work.

"Why did we choose the eagle?" Crain asks rhetorically. "In Wisconsin, the eagle represents up north, as well as the Mississippi and Wisconsin rivers that are near and dear to peoples' hearts and part of their identity," she says. "Choosing the eagle reminds people that they can do something...they had a hand in bringing this species back and in the next conservation successes."

Wisconsinites helped push for the ban of the pesticide DDT, which improved eagle hatching rates, helped fund and conduct surveys to find and protect eagle nests, and supported eagles' comeback through donating through the tax check off.

"This is one way, anybody, from any occupation, any station in life, can change the environment. We're recognizing the important role every citizen plays in the protection of rare species," Crain says.

Lainet Garcia-Rivera, a community program coordinator for the Urban Ecology Center in Milwaukee, is one of a dozen Wisconsinites who are helping promote the plate and caring for nature, as is outdoors adventurer Karen Crossley of Madison (bottom photo).



MICHAEL KIENITZ

An eagle hotspot yields a winner

Troy Hattermer couldn't have known the important role he would play in future conservation efforts when he set out that February day looking for eagles to photograph.

An avid hunter and angler, Hattermer got into photography at the urging of a co-worker, Jerry Zimmer, at the S. B. Foot Tanning Company in Red Wing, Minn.

"Jerry always brought some of his photos to work and talked about how much fun he was having. I said, 'I've got to try it.'"

Hattermer bought a cheap camera at first.

"I loved it, so I went and bought better equipment and it snowballed from there," he says.

That February day his search took him to the backwater sloughs of the Mississippi River near Hager City, Wis., a known hotspot for eagles.

He captured the image of an eagle swooping down to scoop up a fish. "As soon as I looked at this one on the computer, I went, 'Oh, wow!'"

He entered it in DNR's photo contest to provide an eagle image for the specialty plate.

"I'm just an amateur and a guy like me thinks you're not going to win anything so it was a nice surprise," Hattermer says. "It will be nice to see it on a plate and other people buying it."

The plate design was unveiled Aug. 5 in a ceremony at Prairie du Sac and the Department of Transportation started issuing the plate Sept. 1, according to Jeremy Krueger, supervisor of License Plate and Postal Services for the state's Division of Motor Vehicles.



MICHAEL KIENITZ



AJ Sullivan, an ironworker from Poynette, and Preston Cole (below), chair of the Natural Resources Board, DNR's policymaking board, share a love of nature. Cole says that spending time in nature has social, psychological and health benefits and he is committed to increasing children's chances to have more outdoor opportunities.

MICHAEL KIENITZ

"I like the plate," says Krueger, who worked with DNR's Tyler Brandt, the plate's designer, to shepherd the eagle plate through the nearly year-long process. "It's definitely something different. There really aren't any others (of the other specialty plates) that have the full photo across the plate."

Hattermer's eagle photo provided the kind of dramatic image and implied movement that Crain and Brandt sought in the design, and it worked well with national plate design standards DMV follows for easy identification and safety.

The eagle is printed on a high quality sticker that is attached to the metal plate and then stamped with a number or, for an extra charge, a personalized message of up to six characters.

Motorists can choose between two designs that support the Endangered Resources Fund: the new eagle plate or the wolf plate introduced in 1995.

The design introduced in 2010 bearing a badger and other native species is no longer being sold, although current users can keep that plate on their cars. State law allows only two endangered resources plate designs to be sold and the wolf has remained significantly more popular



MICHAEL KIENITZ



Mary Kay Neumann, an artist and activist, uses her paintings to encourage people to make changes to protect the things they love in nature.

among motorists so the badger was retired. Through 2014, the endangered resources plates rank third in sales among Wisconsin specialty plates, right after the military plates and one promoting the Green Bay Packers, Krueger says. He expects the eagle plate will be popular as well.

Portraits of caring for nature

Gratifyingly, people have been eager to help promote the plate, Crain says. A dozen citizens and Glory posed for photos with the new plate to highlight the message that everyone can play a role in caring for nature. Scores of people turned out in Prairie du Sac to watch the unveiling of the plate.

That enthusiasm is not so surprising in a state that produced John Muir, Aldo Leopold and Gaylord Nelson, and which keeps minting new heroes, like Huda Alkaff of West Bend, honored this July by President Obama for her work promoting environmental preservation as an Islamic faith ethic, and the late educator Dorothy “Dot” Davids, a member of the Stockbridge-Munsee Community Band of Mohican Indians, celebrated in Patty Loew’s 2014 book, “Seventh Generation Earth Ethics: Native Voices of Wisconsin.”

“...Wisconsin has an especially rich tradition of people who have committed themselves to the land in a passionate and self-reflective way,” observes UW-Madison Environmental Historian William Cronon in his essay, “Landscape and Home: Environmental Traditions in Wisconsin.”

People like Dick and Kim Cates, pasture-based livestock farmers in Spring Green. Conservation is a way of life for the couple, winners of the 2013 Leopold Conservation Award from the Wisconsin Farm Federation Bureau and partners.

“In 1967, when I was 15 years old, my dad purchased this old hill farm and he put my four siblings and me to work; we did whatever he needed us to do. It wasn’t a business, but a place where we tended cattle and made hay as a family; through this work we started to learn about what it means to take care of the land,” Dick Cates recalls.

A year later at Christmas, his dad gave him a copy of Leopold’s “A Sand County Almanac,” now regarded as a cornerstone for conservation science, policy and ethics. He read the entire book before school started again in January.

“The idea of a land ethic was important to my father, and it began to take on meaning to me. Leopold’s notion of conservation — when people and land do



Jeanette Hoard volunteers to help restore the prairies, woodlands, streams and wetlands in a county park near Cross Plains.

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CATES FAMILY FARM



Dick and Kim Cates, pasture-based livestock farmers in Spring Green, view conservation as a way of life that takes care of their land and their family.

well together by virtue of their partnership — became a motivating force in my life.

“It has been an honor and a privilege to steward the resources of our farm in a way to protect and improve them, and at the same time, make a living for our family. I look at this land as a gift; it will take care of us through the ages if we listen and work with all it can teach us.”

Lainet Garcia-Rivera found promoting the eagle plate a natural, particularly given her commitment to bat conservation, which benefits from the plate sales.

She spent more than a decade researching bats at a leading institute in her native Cuba before coming to Wisconsin and volunteering for DNR’s bat conservation program.

Now a community program coordinator at an Urban Ecology Center in Milwaukee, she helps urban residents get involved in environmental education and outdoor recreation programs, thus they will learn more about the nature around them. She supports volunteers in using the acoustic bat monitoring assisting ultrasound detectors to record calls of

different bat species. During her research in Cuba, she used fine-mesh nets called “mist nets” to carefully catch bats, to identify and tag the species to track them for future studies.

“The mist nets are a powerful tool. I can show the bats to kids and adults and say, ‘Is it not a cute animal?’” she says. “I see how their faces change after they get a chance to see bats up close.”

In the end, that’s what the plate is all about — getting the chance to see nature up close, not in a picture book or a museum after it’s disappeared from the land, skies and water.

And that brings us back to Glory.

Without everyday people caring about nature, Glory might not be here today. The bird injured its wing when it fell out of its nest in the Prairie du Sac area. A canoeist on the Wisconsin River found the injured bird and it was taken

to a wildlife rehabilitator.

The young bird healed successfully under the rehabilitator’s care but had accidentally imprinted on people and could not be returned to the wild but was sent to the Schlitz Audubon Nature Center in 2001, Visty says.

So Glory and Visty became a pair. They have since done hundreds of events, helping share with others the awe and excitement of being a heartbeat away from a majestic and powerful apex predator. And now, helping make the next conservation success possible in Wisconsin. 

Lisa Gaumnitz writes for the Natural Heritage Conservation program.

ONWARD AND UPWARD

Eagles are doing well in Wisconsin. They’ve made a significant comeback from 100 pairs in the 1970s to a record 1,344 occupied nests in 2013 and the numbers continue to grow, says Carly Lapin, a Natural Heritage Conservation district ecologist stationed in Rhinelander who coordinates eagle nest surveys.

“We think bald eagle numbers may be approaching carrying capacity in the Northwoods, meaning their numbers have grown to the point where all available territories are occupied. Smaller lakes generally support one pair, and we already have that on many lakes.

“We’d like to see their numbers hold steady or continue to increase. We are starting to see them expand into southern Wisconsin; bald eagles were documented nesting in the Milwaukee area recently for the first time in many years and we will probably continue to see them expand southward.”

Wisconsin just completed its 43rd year of nest surveys, one of the longest running in the country. DNR pilots and biologists conduct surveys from fixed-wing aircraft to document the locations of nests in April and then return in May or June to count the number of eaglets hatched.

“In Wisconsin, we should be proud of our bald eagle recovery,” Lapin says. “We’re in the top five for numbers in the country and we were one of the first states leading the way in bald eagle recovery. We have a long-standing monitoring program and in the past, we exported eagles to other states to assist with additional recovery efforts. People have a real respect for eagles, and I think it’s a real treat for people to see them.”

>>> FOR MORE INFORMATION

To purchase the eagle license plate, go to dnr.wi.gov and search “eagle plate” to download the form along with directions on how to mail it in.

Share your photos of your new eagle plate on social media using the hashtag #Weagleplate.

