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James Lundgren, the National Eagle Center's director of finance and operations, posed with Angel, a bald eagle, during the center's groundbreaking Monday.

THE EAGLE'S NEST

WABASHA, MINN.

Driving south along the Mississippi River on Monday morning, Audrey Bennett saw three eagles. "I knew it was going to be a good day," said Bennett, president of the Prairie Island Tribal Council.

Bennett was headed for downtown Wabasha, where she and the rest of the council were honored guests at the groundbreaking of the National Eagle Center.

Conceived in 1989 as the Eagle Watch program and operating for the past six years from a downtown storefront, the nonprofit center has reached its dream of constructing a \$4.3 million building on the shore of the Mississippi River. It will feature an observation deck, educational spaces and exhibits about the bald eagle, its migration flyway, the Mississippi River and the eagle's connection to humans.

An important component will be American Indian perspectives, Bennett said, and the Prairie Island tribe contributed \$500,000 Monday to show its support.

"The eagle is a sacred and treasured part of our spir-

ituality, and it's a joy and an honor to help educate people about it," she said.

It's no accident that eagle-watching is popular in Wabasha, where the Chippewa River from Wisconsin meets the Mississippi. The mix of stronger current and a narrower main channel keeps a 3-mile stretch of the Mississippi open most winters, said James Lundgren, the center's director of finance and operations.

Eagle continues: New building, to be finished in 2007, is expected to attract significantly more visitors. **B4** ▶

ABOUT THE BALD EAGLE

- The bald eagle was designated as the national emblem in 1782. Also in contention was the wild turkey.
- The bald eagle received its name from an old English word "balde," which means "white."
- Some eagles' nests are 6 feet across and 4 to 10 feet high, enough space to hold a small car.
- Bald eagles weigh up to 15 pounds and have wingspans from 6 to 8 feet. They typically grow to full size in about 12 weeks and live for about 40 years.
- The greatest number of eagles in the Wabasha area can be seen from mid-February to mid-March, when those migrating north wait for frozen lakes and rivers to thaw. On March 2, 2000, birders counted 697 bald eagles near Wabasha.

Source: National Eagle Center



Photos by RICHARD SENNOTT • rsennott@startribune.com

The new National Eagle Center will overlook the Mississippi in Wabasha. The \$4.3 million building is to be completed in 2007.

Eagle Center is spreading its wings

◀ EAGLE FROM B1

And open water means fish, he said, enabling about 150 eagles to live in the area's huge cottonwood trees year-round and hundreds more to migrate during fall and spring.

It wasn't always so, though. Bald eagles were on the fast track to extinction in the 1950s and 1960s, but the banning of the insecticide DDT, stronger federal protection laws and conservation efforts have helped the species recover.

Federal officials upgraded the bald eagle from "endangered" to "threatened" status in 1995, and proposed to remove it from the Endangered Species Act list entirely in 1999.

The proposal is still pending.

As the eagle began showing up in larger numbers in Minnesota, Wabasha resident Mary Rivers started talking to her friends and organizing them into teams of volunteers to answer questions from visitors.



Humble beginnings

During the 1990s, they took turns standing on the riverbank during winter weekends with a guest book and spotting scopes, she said.

Jerry Arens, a local businessman and co-chairman of the center's capital campaign, said the center is the only one of its kind in the nation, and will attract more visitors and



ABOUT THE CENTER

Information about the National Eagle Center is on the internet at nationaleaglecenter.org.

more business for the town.

The center currently serves about 25,000 visitors a year, he said, and that number could quadruple after the new

14,000-square-foot one is finished in 2007.

In addition to the exhibits, the center will continue to feature and care for three captive eagles with permanent wing injuries that can no longer survive in the wild.

Curtis Campbell, a Prairie Island elder who has had a long association with the center, said he never tires of watching eagles.

"When the Creator put everything on the face of the earth, the eagle was the most supreme of all flying animals," he said. "The eagle is a spiritual symbol of our thoughts and of ourselves as people, because the eagle is a mighty hunter."

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