

Move

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Ponca State Park where there seems to be abnormally high beaver activity," said Tim Cowman, director of the Missouri River Institute (MRI) in Vermillion.

Schauer has seen a shift in the beaver population during recent months.

"When the river came up, it caused the beavers to move," he said. "Where they were at (prior to flooding) was now 10, 20 and 30 feet under water. They had to move — they couldn't stay."

FORCED TO RELOCATE

The beaver wasn't alone in its predicament, Schauer said.

"It's not just the beaver that has been pushed out of its habitat. It affects a host of wildlife," he said. "They had the choice to move, swim away or die. A lot of them moved and shifted where they spent their time."

The appearance of beavers outside their usual habitat led many people to believe — mistakenly — they were seeing a huge surge in the critter's numbers, Schauer said.

"What happened on the river is not a population explosion of beavers," he said. "The river was up so high that the beavers were within the water levels. Anytime you're talking about water-based furbearers like beaver or muskrat, and you have high water, they may need to move outside their preferred habitat. There may be increased numbers of them (elsewhere), and we have seen that."

However, that river levels have receded in recent months, Schauer said. The changes were particularly striking when viewed during aerial views in November and earlier this month.

"You are amazed at how much the river changes," he said. "Our increase in water (from flooding) came until about August, and it's been dry since then. The water levels are way down from the peak of the release (from the dams)."

In some cases, beavers moved 150 or 200 feet higher during the flooding, Schauer said. With the river levels receding, the beavers are moving back to lower spots. They are inhabiting some pockets where water still remains.

"If the water comes up, the beavers would be forced to move again," he said.

The furbearers' numbers are up overall, Schauer said. "The beaver population is up, but the muskrat population is even higher. We also have river otters," he said.

The increasing activity of furbearers has drawn the attention of trappers, Schauer said.

"We are right now in the heart of the trapping season for beavers, along with muskrat, fox and coyotes," he said. "When you have a high population (of furbearers) because of high water conditions, it brings out more trappers because there are more opportunities. Then, there are other things, like the prices that you get for fur."

The beavers have created some unwelcome damage to cottonwoods in their new habitat, Schauer said.

"I'm concerned about the big cottonwoods, which are the preferred eagle site for nesting," he said. "We have those 50-, 60-, 80- and 100-year-old cottonwoods, and it's not a good thing that we are losing them."

Cowman has also seen damaged cottonwood trees because of extensive flooding.

"Root systems have been made weak due to several months of water inundation," he said. "What used to be a healthy tree now can be easily blown over during windy conditions."

Cowman also noted noticeable impacts to the nuisance red cedar tree species.

"These trees often take over the forest understory, which has a negative effect on the health of the Missouri River forests," he said. "However, the flood waters and high water tables caused by the flood seem to have damaged or even killed some of the red cedar population. That will help thin out the understory in the cottonwood forests."

"The extent of impact to forested areas is still unknown and will need to be monitored over the next couple of years," he added.

FLY LIKE AN EAGLE

Eagles have shown the ability and willingness to move if cottonwoods are disturbed, Schauer said. He pointed to an active nesting site between Sioux Falls and Brandon, where a strong wind blew down an old cottonwood tree.

"The eagles by nature were forced to move because of disturbances to their nest," he said.

Efforts are under way to protect cottonwoods wherever possible, Schauer said.

"I talked to our Pierre staff, and they are trying to protect the trees with fences so the beavers don't

get to the trees," he said. "But it would be impossible to protect every tree along the river."

The public has shown an especially active interest in the eagles, Schauer said. "It's a majestic bird, it has recovered in numbers and it's our national symbol," he said.

GF&P crews have flown the river twice this month, noticing a doubling of eagle numbers — from 129 eagles last week to an estimated 250 to 300 eagles this week — between Sioux City and Fort Randall, Schauer said.

Why would the eagle population double in just a week?

Schauer attributes the migration to two scenarios: the cold weather and snow cover in North Dakota and northern South Dakota, combined with the Yankton region's mild weather, dry conditions and the presence of more waterfowl.

"With our mild weather, there has been open water. There is a lot of fish and a lot more waterfowl, and the eagles follow," he said. "It will be interesting to see the weather play out. We traditionally do our midwinter waterfowl and eagle survey during the first full week of January. We generally see 120 to 125 eagles."

At least 50 to 75 eagles have been reported at the mouth of the James River near Yankton, Schauer said. Eagles have also been sighted near Gavins Point Dam by Yankton and at the Karl Mundt refuge near Lake Andes.

Schauer encourages bird enthusiasts to take in the eagle sightings.

"Right now is a good time, before the cold weather sets in and the waterfowl moves for the season," he said. "We are working with the Corps of Engineers' visitor center on the Nebraska side. Right now, eagles are on the Jim River island (at the mouth), the best of anyplace. Now is the time to go (for eagle watching). You will be amazed. Unless there is a cold spell, there will be an unbelievable amount of eagles."

ADAPTING TO A NEW RIVER

The beavers and eagles aren't the only wildlife affected by this year's flooding, Schauer said.

The GF&P has received a large number of calls about displaced deer having fawns in areas not normally seen, he said. "They have picked up a half-dozen fawns down there by the (Dakota) Dunes," he said.

Flooding also resulted in the

movement of sand and sediment, affecting some vegetation, Schauer said.

"The Corps was talking even before the floods about the reservoirs and how some of the system has silted in," he said. "They are talking about flushing some of it down."

Schauer sees this year's wildlife movement to new areas as temporary, unless the region is hit with another wet winter with a great deal of snow. He foresees the floodwaters to continue receding, with wildlife returning to their normal habitat.

However, Lepisto believes this year's flooding has created long-term changes to the Missouri River and surrounding region.

"What is there now will change this winter as wind and the ice will erode and scour the sandbars piled up by the record high releases this summer," he said. "Obviously, it will be a much different Missouri River for people and wildlife next year."

In that respect, Schauer agrees that dramatic changes have already occurred both in and along the river.

"It's like a whole new river," he said. "If you're out there trying to navigate the channel, you will see the main channel has changed, especially from the air. There are sandbars where they have never been now. It's a totally different environment."

Despite such massive changes, the beaver, eagles and their fellow creatures will adjust to their new surroundings, Schauer predicted.

"The wildlife is unbelievably adaptable," he said. "It just takes a little bit of time."

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Vets

From Page 1

funded by Avera Sacred Heart Hospital. A cost estimate of the project was not available.

She believes that the local commitment to long-term care for seniors offers something unique to the veterans who would be using the proposed facility.

Rezac added that Avera Sacred Heart Hospital is in the unique situation because it already owns the land on which the proposed facility would be built.

"We are in the process of establishing a long-term care plan for seniors to have all of our beds right here on the Majestic Bluffs campus," she said. "We have 115 acres right here that we can develop. So we have plenty of land. We are going to bring our Yankton Care Center here on campus, so this would be the perfect time to incorporate the 50-bed Veterans Administration home onto our facility."

Rezac said she hopes to share a formal presentation on the bid with state officials within the next four months.

"We have a very strong record of experience and people from the community that will attest to

our commitment to care and our commitment to veterans," she said. "We do believe we can give them the care and comfort that they have earned and deserve. We do believe we will be the preferred choice to offer this care to our veterans, it would be our privilege to serve them."

One such testimonial was given during Friday's discussion by Dan Eisenbraun, who noted that he has both a personal and professional association with the Majestic Bluffs campus.

"I feel like I know this facility and organization very well," he said. "I have spent over a decade serving on the board and various planning committees. I can speak from the perspective of governance. I can guarantee that if Avera Sacred Heart gets the opportunity to provide this facility, they will do it at the highest standards."

As for personal ties, he had both his parents and a brother live at the Majestic Bluffs facility.

"I cannot tell you how deeply this facility has impacted my family's lives," he said. "The care they receive, the staff out here — they treat you like extended family. Given the change to build the VA facility out here, you would not be disappointed."

The presentation and testimonials made a good impression on those in attendance, in particular on Richard Akland, a member of

the American Legion Post 128 from Hudson. Akland also serves as membership chairman for District 8 of the American Legion of which Yankton is a part.

"District 8 has a lot of veterans, several thousand," he said. "We lose veterans every day; we are all aging. I think this plan is just a win-win deal. I hope I never have to live here, but it is nice to have it if you need it. Sometimes we don't just get old and die; we get old and need assistance."

Akland said that he felt there is really a need for two homes in eastern South Dakota.

"If a veterans home is dedicated to take care of them, that is a good thing," he said. "If Brandon, Brookings or Aberdeen can compare with what Avera Sacred Heart wants to do — they want to fund it, they want to build it — then I think the state should consider two homes. But, I think other facilities are going to be looking for funding and grants to be able to build the facility. I think (Avera Sacred Heart) have a very good chance here."

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