

The upper Michigan trip of 1968 was taken by Sergej Postupalski and myself and one Stuart D. Henderson, an old friend from Andover, Mass., who was interested in seeing some eagles and photographing our exploits. It got off to a bad start in Ohio, with my ailing 10-year old jeep station wagon laid up in a local garage on June 22nd, our tentative date of departure. Indeed, it was not until late afternoon of the 23rd that Stu and I finally got underway with the jeep still not entirely up to snuff.

We arrived at the Postupalski residence in Royal Oak, Michigan around midnight of the 23rd and after some very limited socializing, turned in for the night. In the morning, our 2-car caravan pulled on to the northbound lane of I-75, augmented by Sergej and about half a ton of additional gear and baggage, including a fickle 3 h.p., Johnson outboard motor, which would soon be doing its utmost to turn the enterprise into a complete fiasco. By early evening we got as far as the University of Michigan Biological Station near Pellston, where we stopped to take on Sergej's 10 foot skiff "The Stumpjumper" (so dubbed by its confederates following an episode a few years ago, where Sergej ran into a sunken stump and capsized!). So far, the excursion had been a warm one, with temperatures in the high 90's all the way, hardly conducive to high-speed travel with a jeep in precarious condition.

It was almost dark as we approached the Mackinac Bridge over the Straits but we could easily see an ominous black cloud hanging over the other side. "Could that possibly mean rain?" I quipped facetiously. "Naw" said Sergej, sounding a little doleful, "You know Michigan better than that!"

The town of Manistique was our initial objective and by midnight we were on the outskirts; we camped nearby on a Lake Michigan beach, getting what sleep we could under the circumstances. Tuesday morning (June 25th), I awoke to a familiar Michigan phenomenon: the pitter-patter of raindrops on the roof. If there was anything we did not need, it was that!

By the time we finished breakfast, the rain had tapered off to a very light drizzle. Being anxious to "get the show on the road" we headed north to the first stop: Seney National Wildlife Refuge. Seney was particularly attractive because of its two active aeries, both productive, one with two, the other with one young. Furthermore, Sergej was fairly certain that at least one of the nests would be an easy climb. Unfortunately, the refuge manager refused to let us proceed.

As our first disappointment of the trip registered, we cut eastward to Manistique Lake, where the next nest was located. The lake was choppy, so Stuart was relegated to stay behind while the Stumpjumper headed for the other side.

The nest was in a Silver Maple near the edge of a slough just off the lake, making access very difficult. At first we tried reaching it from the open side, but were foiled by deep, oozing mud just under the surface of the water of a creek. While searching for an easier way, we managed to become separated. When I ultimately located the aerie, there was little I could do, except beat off the mosquitoes until Sergej arrived, since he was carrying all the climbing gear and the mosquito net dope.

Once the eaglet was banded we waded back to the summer cottage on the lake shore where we had docked, to rendezvous with Stu. At Black Creek Flooding, a short distance away, we all got into the act; a heavily laden Stumpjumper slowly moved upstream to a small island on which the next active nest was located. Heavy muskeg made docking difficult, but at length we did find an opening to the shoreline.

We were unloading the gear when we made the horrible discovery that we had forgotten "the stick" (a bamboo pole with a bent wire at one end, used to "hook" the legs of eaglets little Bo-Feep style and pull them to the edge of the nest to be banded), which is almost indispensable in situations where nests are too treacherous to climb into. This one fit right into that category. Sergej volunteered to go back to get it, while Stu and I went about the business of ascending the nest tree, a big over-mature yellow birch, completely dead at the top where, of course, the nest just had to be located.

With Stuart as groundman, rendering invaluable assistance by pulling or tying off a rope from time to time, I made it to the nest without much trouble. There I tied a double hitch, i.e. using each end of my climbing line through two different crotches (both dead limbs), on the premise that if one should give way, the other might still hold!

A good hour had elapsed since Sergej had left; his return was long overdue, and there still was no sign of him. It appeared that waiting for him was a lost cause, so I took a poor substitute for the stick from the aerie, tried to maneuver the youngster around with it in an effort to get him into grabbing range. At first, I had little success but after a while he became so irritated at the stick that he seemed to forget himself, and made the fortuitous mistake of jumping over to my side of the nest. The seizure was deftly made; I soon banded him, checking over the nest for food remains (part of Sergej's study) and made a quick descent.

Wondering what had become of our glorious leader, Stu and I gathered up the gear and headed out into the direction from which we had come. We soon ran into Sergej on the trail; his first words were: "We've got troubles!" Elucidating, he explained that the outboard was acting up, it would start O.K., but died right out at the throttle was opening; some kind of a carburetor problem he surmised, rendering it quite useless. He had been rowing most of the way back. His mood was only slightly improved by the news that we already banded the eaglet. I guess we were all feeling a little depressed as we oared our way downstream to the Jeep.

The motor, of course, was vital to our operation; there was no question but that it would have to be repaired, and the sooner, the better! It was getting late and about time to head back to Manistique, to get some thing to eat and find lodging for the night. Should there be some place in town to have the outboard fixed, it would probably be closed by the time we got there. Sergej had an alternate plan up his sleeve; we turned off at the airfield on the way into town, where he explained our problem to Vern and Frances Bernard, the couple who ran the place, where Sergej often charts eagle survey flights. Mrs. Bernard got on the phone and soon made contact with a local mechanic who agreed to look at our sick engine at his residence, later that evening. Sergej noted the directions to his home and we adjourned to a restaurant up the road for a belated but very satiable repast.

The mechanic worked on our engine for about two hours. It was past 11 P.M. before he got the engine back together and, much to our surprise running again. In the process however, he had broken the rewind spring on the starter rope for which he had no replacement. The next morning, still faced with an inoperative engine which we finally decided to leave at a repair shop near Rapid River. While it was being fixed, we would busy ourselves with a "walk in" nest in the Fish Lake area of Hiawatha National Forest.

We drove through rain, almost all the way to the north-central portion where the nest was located. This nest was in the uppermost dead crotch of a large yellow birch, with virtually no limbs (alive or otherwise) above it - something like coming up under an open umbrella with nothing to hang on to. Such nests are always a problem to deal with, but we are more or less equipped to do so with a short section of rope ladder, the function of which is to provide something "solid" to climb on and at the same time to distribute the weight of the climber more evenly on the nest, thereby perhaps enhancing his life expectancy somewhat (in theory, anyway!).

What I generally do is climb to the base of the aerie, or off to one side, throw a line over it, lowering the one end to Sergej or some body on the ground, and attaching the rope ladder to the other. The ground-man then pulls on his end while I "whip" the ladder around irregularities on the side of the nest. When the first rung is level with the platform the rope is secured down below; I do likewise with the bottom of the ladder, and proceed upward - shaking in my boots every step of the way! On the top rung of the ladder are two heavy iron hooks which fit snugly in to hitches on my climbing belt making it unnecessary to actually climb onto the platform itself (which might panic the young into premature flight) and freeing both hands for the banding operation.

Though not exactly overjoyed by a situation requiring the use of the ladder, we were somewhat anxious to try it out; for some time now it had been part of our gear, but had never been used. At Fish Lake that day, it more or less proved itself, though I did lack a certain amount of confidence as I inched my way up, rung by rung. By the time I reached the platform my knees felt like rubber.

This bird incidentally, was recovered on October 24, 1968, found apparently shot, near Gregory, South Dakota.

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John Holt, tying in at one of the nests (Witch Lake).

Sidetrip completed, we picked up board at Rapid River, and drove lake in Dickenson County - where we arrived late that afternoon in the midst of a downpour. For some time we lingered at the public access site, looking across the rain-swept lake at the earle other side, debating whether or should get out the raingear and

tackle the job in spite of the horrendous conditions: certainly the two youngsters were as wet as they could ever get by now, and the nest tree (a white pine) we knew from last year, was relatively easy and safe to climb.

Although both, Stu and I were in favor of getting the job done and over with, the rain notwithstanding, Sergej was definitely against it. In the end, with no sign of the rain letting up, our leader's will prevailed.

Holding over near Ralph presented still another problem: nobody felt like camping out in the pouring rain and lodging was a pretty scarce commodity around there even more so at this particular time, due to an influx of construction personnel working on a cross-country pipeline through that area.

At right: At the public access site in Dickenson County, debating what to do



Photos by:
Baldwin (upper)
Henderson (lower)

After some inquiries we finally located a cabin renting for \$15.00 a night somewhat higher than we were accustomed to paying, but on a night like that we considered ourselves fortunate to have a roof over our heads at any price!

By morning the rain had abated; and we purposely took our time arising and eating breakfast, hoping for some slight improvement in conditions before we headed down to the lake. It had, in fact, stopped altogether by the time we got there, but the cumbersome raingear was still very much in order, everything was dripping wet, including the eaglets!

On to a nest, near the town of Witch Lake, where we arrived about mid-afternoon on the 27th. As yet we had not required the services of our trusty outboard since the repair work at Rapid River; we brought it back to active duty. The lake was a little too rough for the size of our craft; poor Stu was again elected to bide his time at the landing while Sergej and I braved the choppy water. With fingers crossed, we climbed aboard; Sergej gave the starter a few turns and we took off into the wind with a confident surge of power. Everything went great for 3 minutes, when the engine began sputtering and died out altogether; Sergej yanked angrily at the starter rope, but nothing happened. We decided to wait a while, paddling to regain the lost distance. After a while, we tried again with the same results. Once more I took up the oars...and so it was that we proceeded across the lake at something like a snail's pace, alternatively rowing and riding.



Author on the left, Sergej Postupalsky pulling starter rope. Photo by Henderson

The nest was in a white pine, right on the shoreline, and almost directly over a summer house on the lake. It had been there for quite some time as evidenced by the limbs of the tree, which had grown symmetrically around and beyond it. As might be expected, the construction of the cabin and related human activity had an adverse effect on the birds, and for several seasons they were either inactive or unsuccessful at this site.

More recently however, the dwelling has seen only very limited use, and the eaglets have virtually had the place to themselves the past few seasons - at least during the critical incubation and early stages of development of the young, so it is again on the active list.

This year, it had two fine youngsters, well grown, but fortunately not given to premature flights, as about the only place they could have gone was into "the drink"

We put in at Chrystal Falls that evening and it would be safe to say that our spirits were not entirely uplifted by the events of the day. Also, our grumbling stomachs did little to improve the atmosphere, though at least this was one discomfort we could remedy in short order: a fish-fry supper was given top priority, after which we checked in at a \$3.00 per capita hotel and sought out an outboard clinic for future reference.

Our mechanical difficulties were by no means confined to the outboard motor; the 40 weight oil (which we had bought in the heat of the Lower Peninsula) was something like tar in the relative cold and damp climate here. Getting the old Jeep started in the morning had become a real challenge. Fortunately, there were plenty of hills in the Chrystal Falls area to give our vehicle a "running start" the following day.

The morning of the 28th we literally got off to this running start after we dropped the outboard off for repairs and had breakfast. The sky was still overcast, but showing definite signs of improvement. At last we could make up for lost time...or so we thought.

We decided to take a "drive-in" southwest of Chrystal Falls while the outboard was in the shop. This historic old site, first reported in the late 1940's, may be the highest aerie in the state of Michigan. It is at the top of a huge white pine, measuring more than 10 feet in girth at the base; the first branch is fully 70 feet up and the nest a good 40 feet beyond that!



Tree with nest at Chrystal Falls. (pix by Baldwin)



To me it was an awesome sight, and took nearly an hour of groaning, sweating and cussing to climb - mainly because of the numerous handicaps (like chronic muscle spasms, utter physical exhaustion and petrifying fear) impeding my progress all the way up!

Then, as I was jockeying around for a position from which to swing out to the edge of the nest, Tarzan style, one of the eaglets panicked and down he sailed into the green canopy of hardwoods about 60 feet below, coming to a rest, upside down, on a small sugar maple, about 30 feet from the ground. Neither of my cohorts could climb so there was little to do but wait until the dummy grew tired of hanging and released his grip; in the meantime I could get myself tied in, beside the nest and take care of the other eaglet.

An hour or so later, eaglet No. 1, still hanging on and showing no detectable signs of weakening-which was more than I could say for myself. Though securely anchored in place, my position was far from comfortable, and it seemed like every muscle in my body was strained to its limits; to add to my discomfort, I was mentally contemplating the horrible prospect of having to go down to retrieve the youngster and then climb back up again to return him to his nest: I really did not feel up to that!

Stu and Sergej were becoming restless and began to implement a tree-shaking, stick-throwing strategy in a feeble effort to dislodge the obstinate critter. Whether it worked, or the eaglet simply reached its physical limit, I do not know but at length I heard the welcome cries of "Here he comes" and "We've got him" from down below - and every fibre of my beleaguered body heaved a deep sigh of relief: Hallelujah!

Just then, I happened to glance skyward and there at about 1.00 o'clock from me, coming in a gentle stoop toward the aerie, was the unmistakable form of old "papa" eagle with a red squirrel in tow, evidently quite unaware of our presence.



"Papa" Eagle returning to nest
(Photo by Baldwin)

About halfway down, though, he suddenly caught sight of me at the nest, was so shocked that he dropped the squirrel, which continued to fall in my general direction. Instantly the old boy had second thoughts about relinquishing his booty and folding his enormous wings, plummeted after it. For a moment both he and his quarry were coming directly at me on what I was certain would be a collision course; there was little to do about it but shut my eyes and brace for the impact!

I recall hearing the squirrel hit the foliage below, then a terrific rush of air through pinions as the great bird checked his descend and pulled out of his dive right beside me. With heavy flaps he spiraled upward, uttering squeaky cries of protest - sounding much like a rusty door hinge. I watched spellbound as he gradually drifted away, his snowy head and tail being last to fade from sight against the dark receding clouds. Without doubt, it was one of the grandest spectacles I have ever been fortunate to witness.

It was not until early afternoon that we finally completed the operation and returned to Chrystal Falls for lunch, to check on the outboard which was ready and according to the repairman, had been suffering from a faulty waterpump.

We picked a couple of easy aeries to keep us busy for the rest of the day. A nest at Michigamme Slough was a new one on Sergej's list, reported to him by the Michigan Department of Conservation. From the air it did not appear to be a difficult climb but down below it was a different story. Not knowing any better, we took the nearest trail and soon found ourselves in the middle of a swamp, with the Jeep hopelessly bogged down in a quagmire of mud caused by the excessive rains. Sergej and I got out to assess the situation and while so engaged, Stuart backed off with his camera (picture regretfully not suitable for publication. Ed). Neither of us was really in the mood for pictures but Stu maintained they would be great to show to my Mom and Dad back in Massachusetts.

In our infinite wisdom we made absolutely no provision for such an emergency, having not so much as a shovel in our wide range of tools. With little more than our bare hands and superior intellect, we addressed ourselves to the problem with the usual expertise: we must have looked like the Keystone Cops as we faltered around in our feeble attempts to dislodge the Jeep! Eventually we did back out of our predicament but only after taking the trouble to unload most of the gear and jack up all 4 wheels (in succession), filling in with logs, stones and other debris underneath. This got it off the frame and provided the necessary traction to move under its own power again.

It was dusk by the time we got around to the other logging trail, drove in, and located the nest which was in a maple on a very dead and badly cracked limb.

In all likelihood it would not have supported my weight; there was not need to climb on it anyway, thanks to a live terminal branch running parallel to it and close to the side of the nest. I climbed up carefully and tied in. Then stretching, I was able to touch the platform with "the stick" and I dragged the youngsters over to the edge within reach.

The two eaglets were quite unusual in that they were only about half-grown while virtually every other youngster in the state was close to fledging. I "hooked" onto one, cradled him in my arms and banded him; in turn I tried to do likewise with his mate, but he wouldn't budge! A closer examination showed him to be entangled in monofilament fishing line (evidently brought in with a prey item), which was firmly imbedded in the center of the nest. I worked him loose with "the stick", but his problem was far from solved; he had apparently been that way for quite some time. The loop around his tarsus had somehow become knotted and had cut deeply into his foot as he grew. His right foot was now considerably swollen due to poor circulation and seemed to be unfunctional. I cut the line out, lowering him to Sergej and Stu for further examination - hoping for a favorable verdict on his condition. We certainly did not want to take him but there would be little sense in leaving a crippled bird.

Sergej tested the eaglet's ability to use the foot and finally concluded that he would probably be alright, especially in view of the fact that we had removed the causative agent. He banded the unfortunate youngster on his good leg and I returned him to his arboreal home. Descending to the ground, I remarked to Sergej that the aerie was pretty shaky and I doubted it would make it through another season. Neither of us was concerned about the fledgelings at the moment.

That night, we had sort of a farewell celebration at Chrystal Falls. Stuart was due back in Massachusetts on Monday morning (the curse of the working classes), and needed a couple of days traveling time for the return trip; he would be leaving early in the morning, a little disappointed in the way things had turned out, but at least he had seen some of the action. What hurt the most was that he had stuck it out through the worst of it, and now when the sun god finally seemed to be smiling on us, we had to part company. Not the best note to end a vacation on, that's for sure.

The 29th was another beautiful day; we made it to 4 aeries, banding young at three of them (two singles and a double), efficiently and uneventful. At the nest on the Paint River, however, we ran into a snag - or more accurately, a rock is what it was! We had to launch the boat from a private camp just below a bad section of rapids; the water was still quite rough, with plenty of eddies on the surface, denoting submerged rocks underneath. We tried to dodge them, of course, but in all that current, it was something of a lost cause. Before long, we ran abruptly into one, and the "Stump Jumper" did a quick about-face sustaining a bad dent in the hull.



Above: Youngster with injured foot.
Left: Sergej and eaglet near Chrystal Lake.

Both photos by Stuart Henderson

For the moment we were hung up on the stone, but freed ourselves and continued across without further mishap - a little shaken by our experience, but none the worse for wear.

The great river crossing was all in vain, though, along with the ensuing trek and climb to the nest which was in a sugar maple on a high bluff overlooking the river. The single youngster it contained was a proficient trouble maker, leaping far out on a horizontal limb as I came into position beside the platform. Ordinarily, I would have persued him out there but he looked extremely nervous and the nest was so situated that it would have been impossible to keep track of him if he jumped. Rather than risk any such catastrophe, we decided to pass him up and I carefully retreated down the tree.

Rather pleasant weather prevailed on the morning of the 30th. We took on a nest in a yellow birch at Beaton's Lake, noting with disdain a sign at the public landing to the effect that the lake was being "improved"

by the State, i.e. all the fish had been poisoned off with Rotenone, preparatory to restocking with selected game species. The eagles seemed to be experiencing "hard times" because of all this too; neither adult made an appearance as I banded the single youngster, suggesting that now both parents had to range some distance from the aerie in search of food. Also, there were no food remains in the nest, except an empty turtle shell, showing at least one change of menu to which they had condescended in lieu of their preferred prey.

At Thousand Island Lake we spent the rest of the forenoon trying to locate a launching site for the boat, the shore nearest our objective being heavily settled with private camps and virtually no one around to ask permission. Once again we had to abort the mission once we did get to the nest for the very same reason we had done so the previous day at Paint River the previous day. Weather conditions were rapidly deteriorating, a pall of dark clouds had been moving in all morning and it was plain to see that something wet was in the offing. The only question was, how much could we accomplish before it got there.

With more than the usual sense of urgency we pressed on to Langford Lake where we arrived about mid-afternoon. A heavy drizzle broke out as we were crossing the lake and by the time we reached the nest tree it was coming down proper- promising a misereable ordeal at best. The aerie itself was another historic old site of 20 years standing or better, and probably the largest in the State. It was located 70 feet or so from the ground in an over-mature yellow birch; about half the limbs supporting it were dead and quite rotten but the base crotch seemed to be alive and sound. A relatively simple climb to the bottom of the structure was quickly complicated by the problem of circumventing the immense, leaning mass of sticks and debris, judged to be over 12 feet high!

The situation called for the ladder again; in preparation for it, I threw my climbing line over the nest and in doing so inadvertently spooked one of the youngsters into taking the plunge; she flopped clumsily down to the ground and was immediately set upon by Sergej attempting to subdue her with his field jacket. There was nothing quite so awkward to handle as a struggling, full sized eaglet, though - especially when she's a "biter-fiter" as this one certainly was! Filtering up through the second growth canopy came a varied assortment of profanities, "ows" and "ouches" as he caught and banded her and prepared her for the return trip to the nest.

Finally I heard "Okay, take her away" and began to pull the line which she was attached to. Now 10 or 11 pounds of eaglet may not sound like much weight, but hoisting it up 60 feet or more, non-stop, is no joke! I had to laugh, though, as our "bundle of joy" broke through the foliage just below the nest, laying there in the jacket (and pretty well filling it at that!), her head sticking out through the collar and watching everything with great

interest; she looked like some poor soul in a straight-jacket being spirited off to the "happy farm!" I couldn't help thinking as I unraveled her, that if anyone from our "civilized" world could see Sergej and myself now, out here in the Michigan wilderness, in the pouring rain and enduring all these hazards and hardships just to put a ring around a bird's leg...well, I'm sure I wouldn't be the eaglet being fitted for a straight-jacket!

We spent a night in a real dump at Watersmeet, complete with a drunk sleeping it off, under the staircase as we wearily ascended to our \$3.00 room. But the price was right, and it was warm and dry; we could luxuriate in a hot bath and sleep in comfort. Had it been a palace, we would not have asked for more than that!

A stormy frontal system passed during the night, and the morning of July 1 dawned sunny and cool, with an endless procession of billowy, white cumulus clouds riding a strong westerly wind across the sky. It looked nice and all that, but was hardly conducive to what we had in mind.

Conditions being what they were, it seemed wise to avoid using the battered "Stump Jumper" as long as possible; we had a hard enough time keeping it afloat under the best of circumstances, so why push our luck. There was a nest on the Ontonagon River that could be reached on foot; but this was another Sergej had never been to before (except by air) and was not too sure we could locate it. It had originally been reported to us by the U.S. Forest Service personnel based at Watersmeet, so after breakfast we stopped off at the Ranger Station hoping to find someone who could direct us there. It so happened that the forester who had discovered the aerie was on duty and he was only too happy to detail its location. We were to hike in about a mile on swampy woodland trail until it started to parallel the river; continue on to where it leveled off a few hundred yards downstream and should be able to see the aerie on the left hand side, between the trail and the river. It looked like a "shoe in"....

We followed his instructions to the letter, except that we missed a turn quite early in the game, resulting in some confusion as we approached the river. It didn't take long to re-orient ourselves though, once we realized our mistake. At length we came upon a level stretch in the trail that seemed to be what we were looking for, some eagle down adhering to a twig, but still no nest in sight. Sergej forged forward, we managed to get separated, the howling wind made whistling impossible. I finally came upon the nest, right where the ranger said it would be and now had to face the prospect of waiting for Sergej, or completing the job alone. Considering that Sergej would be heading back to the Jeep, I decided to take matters into my own hands without further delay. The weather predictions called for winds reaching a velocity of 20 to 30 miles per hour, but to me 80 feet up in that tree, it might as well have been a hurricane.

TO BE CONTINUED IN THE NOVEMBER-DECEMBER 1970 ISSUE OF EBBA NEWS (Editor)