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A fine day for the eagle-eyed

Drawn by the drama they've watched online, bird fanciers from near and far flock to Santa Cruz Island for a closer look at famous chicks.

By Steve Chawkins
Times Staff Writer

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SANTA CRUZ ISLAND — Not a twitch, not a swallow, not a stretch goes unnoticed. Around the country, eagle fanciers stay glued to their computer screens as the reintroduced bald eagles of Santa Cruz Island go about their daily lives before the unblinking eye of the EagleCam.

From a law office in Franklin Square, N.Y., Deb Hansen — Harpo516 to her peers — gazes 3,000 miles to the west, with the eagles' Santa Cruz nest occupying at least a corner of her screen all day. From a limousine rental agency in Rancho Cucamonga, Darrell Fischer — EagleD — mulls over the same sights: a mother eagle feeding the little gray fuzz-ball that hatched just a few weeks ago, dad returning to the nest with a nice piece of fish; even, on occasion, mom and dad in the throes of a squawking, wing-flapping raptor rendezvous.

Thousands of spectators from at least 32 states and eight countries drop in regularly to iws.org/nestcam.htm to see a nest sheltering the eagles of Santa Cruz, as well as two nests on Catalina. About 400 of them discuss the birds' remarkable comeback in an online forum at chil.vcoe.org/eagle_cam.htm — with participation ranging from occasional to obsessive.

This weekend, several dozen are trekking to Channel Islands National Park off the Ventura coast from as far away as New York and British Columbia. Their aim: to see in person the nests that have for them become something of an online shrine — and to enjoy in person the fellowship of online pals with whom they've become unexpectedly close.

On Saturday, the group tackled an island trail that traversed steep canyons, finally rising hundreds of feet through rolling grasslands overlooking the Pacific.

Some of them were not in tip-top park ranger shape, but they soldiered on, eager to get to a viewing area a good half a mile from the remote ledge where the eagles make their home.

"It's on the third ridge behind that hump," someone ventured as a couple dozen tired hikers squinted through binoculars and long-distance lenses. "I'm almost positive."

As the fog dissolved, they saw what they had come to see: a mature eagle swooping in, an eagle tot covered with gray fuzz popping up.

"It's beyond words," said Pat Wilson, a retired office manager who had traveled from Nanaimo, British Columbia, with her husband, Roy.

She confessed to frequently spending 12 hours a day with two computer screens fired up, all eagles all the time.

She and her husband plan to visit 19 third-graders at Oxnard's Lemonwood school this week — online buddies who are regularly praised by their website elders for the sharpness of their observations.

Saturday's outing wasn't the first get-together of online pals: When EagleDuo from Riverside visited Hawaii, Hulabird picked them up at the airport, drove them to their hotel and lent them her car. When CopperWyrd, a Santa Barbara artist also known as Susan Venable, visited New York City, she shared her tickets to a Neil Diamond concert with Hansen and her husband, Gary.

"The people are so friendly, so giving," said Hansen, a legal secretary. "If I have a personal problem and put out the word on the board, I'll be swamped in phone calls and messages from people who want to help."

Hansen said her co-workers pretend not to care about the eagles, but they pepper her with questions: Is it feeding time yet? Has he grown since yesterday?

Gaping at wildlife in real time over the Internet is nothing new. With the click of a mouse, viewers can zoom in on the private lives of grizzly bears, sea turtles, Madagascar hissing cockroaches.

Cameras are trained on eagle nests in Maine, New York, Tennessee, Canada and elsewhere — but the bald eagles off the California coast carry special significance for the wildlife lovers who have found their way onto the site.

"It's just amazing," said Jann Gallivan, who with her husband, Dave, comprises EagleDuo. "To watch these magnificent birds go through the struggles of bringing another life into the world, to watch them build a nest that's blown apart in the wind and just come back with another branch like nothing happened, to watch the heartbreak when that first egg broke.... It's amazing."

The national bird was nearly done in on the Channel Islands by DDT runoff from the mainland that tainted the ocean. The species has been slowly

brought back on both Santa Cruz and Catalina by researchers introducing eagles from Alaska, stealthily plucking their eggs for incubation at the San Francisco Zoo, returning the hatchlings and monitoring their precious charges' every tic.

Just last year, two chicks pecked their way out of eggs hatched on Santa Cruz without human aid for the first time in half a century. Another made it out just two weeks ago; and, on Catalina, four emerged in the last month, also unaided.

Today there are about 35 eagles in the neighborhood of Channel Islands National Park, said Peter Sharpe, a biologist from the Institute of Wildlife Studies, the Arcata-based group engineering the restoration efforts. When the Santa Cruz Island program took off five years ago, there were none.

Sharpe sheepishly acknowledged that he has attained "rock star status" among the website's regulars. They have funneled more than \$7,000 to his organization for a new camera and for kayaks that can be used to check on nests tucked into the coastal cliffs of Catalina, south of Channel Islands National Park.

The eagle project has mostly been funded by a \$140-million settlement largely from Montrose Chemical Co., which manufactured DDT at a plant near Torrance. The program started on Catalina in 1991 and on Santa Cruz five years ago.

Two of the institute's webcams are focused on Catalina nests, which forum members avidly monitor. The video is a little jerky, with images refreshed every couple of seconds. The stunning Catalina scenes also lack the sound audible on Santa Cruz — where the peeps of an eaglet punctuate a haunting, hypnotic whoosh of wind.

About 7 feet around, the Santa Cruz nest is an organized tangle of branches, perhaps accumulated when eagles were plentiful on the island decades ago. Last year, home viewers were startled to see a man gingerly crouching inside it — a researcher on a mission to band the birds.

Sometimes, the solar-powered, dawn-to-dusk cameras don't capture much action. Still, the watchers chronicle what they can.

"She is so accommodating — look at that adorable baby!" an observer named Fedora wrote recently. "Mom backed up off of the chick after a nice wing-stretch, had another wing-stretch and mom and chicklet are exchanging 'kisses.'"

The website archives thousands of such observations, recording such mundane details as hygiene habits and breeding routines. Sharpe said researchers check in on the forum at least daily, relying on the watchers to catch events the scientists might otherwise miss.

In slack periods, the thread veers toward the personal. There are prayers for a member whose 95-year-old mother broke her foot and advice for a woman devastated when her grandchildren wound up living across the country.

Some of the folks who call themselves "nesters" offer commiseration for an insomniac roused from bed by her husband's snoring. One woman who had a recent retinal transplant gets a raft of good wishes typed in red letters an inch high.

Like the swallows of Capistrano, the eagle-watchers of the Channel Islands keep flocking back to the site, which was set up by the National Park Service and the Ventura County Office of Education.

Many were drawn by the headlines about eaglet A49, who in April 2006 pecked her way out of her shell on Santa Cruz. Two months later, they were watching as A49, by then inevitably nicknamed Cruz, flew away from the nest.

"She just took off and she wasn't there anymore," recalled Jann Gallivan. "Most of us were in tears."

Last October, the group members put together their one previous outing to Santa Cruz. When their boat chugged into Prisoner's Harbor, Cruz's parents — K10 in a treetop and K26 on a crag — were looking down at them.

"It was too much," recalled Manu244, a marina operator named Scott Seaton.

At a harbor near Huntington Beach, Seaton and his wife keep the EagleCam website open on their office computer, with the sound turned high, all day.

"When the wind whips up, someone will ask what's going on and we'll tell them about the eagles," Seaton said. "It's like we've set the hook and we're reeling them in."

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steve.chawkins@latimes.com