

PROBABLE BALD EAGLE PREDATION OF A RING-NECKED PHEASANT.— While conducting research on the wintering behavior of ring-necked pheasants (*Phasianus colchicus*) on 21 February 1993, we observed an immature bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) taking flight near a 45 ha wetland in Ransom County, North Dakota. We first observed the bird at approximately 150 m as it flew 2-3 m above ground level and noted that it was clutching some type of prey. Possibly distracted by our approaching vehicle, the bald eagle (eagle) dropped the prey item while gaining altitude. The prey was a female ring-necked pheasant (pheasant) missing the superior portion of its skull. Additionally, its skin had been stripped from the neck and upper torso, and some minor puncture wounds were on its breast. The day was cold (-11 C), and we assumed the pheasant to have died recently, as the body was warm with no rigor mortis. No apparent evidence of old external injuries or internal abnormalities were found, and the bird was probably in good health at the time of its death. During our inspection of the carcass, the eagle remained perched on a telephone pole about 100 m away. We found feathers and fresh blood in sparse vegetation adjacent to the cattail-dominated (*Typha* spp.) wetland, about 50 m from where the eagle was first seen. No signs of other avian or mammalian predators were observed at or near the site. Snow depth was >30 cm.

In February, we visited this wetland daily and observed no other avian predators excepting an immature eagle, which over a two-week period, was seen twice within 1 km of the wetland. If our observation was an actual attack by the eagle and not an incident of interspecific klepto-parasitism, then to our knowledge, it would be the first recorded direct observation of predation involving a pheasant. We assume predation by migrating eagles to be a common phenomenon (perhaps daily during colder periods; e.g., see Stalmaster and Gessaman, 1984, *Ecol. Monogr.* 54:407-428) but one that is

rarely observed. Most sightings of predation by eagles occur around nesting sites or when the birds are in winter aggregations. In these cases, the predation usually occurs over water with the prey being fish or waterfowl.

In general, galliforms are not prey for eagles. Analyses of food pellets and prey remains of wintering eagles in Nebraska (Lingle and Krapu, 1986, *Prairie Nat.* 18:65-78) and Washington (Fielder, 1982, *Murrelet* 63:46-50) suggest that pheasants are a small part of the diet (<2%). Eagles are opportunistic predators and scavengers, however, and food availability can dictate their foraging strategies. For example, eagle use of galliforms was high in northcentral Washington, where 46% of the food remains recovered at eagle perch sites was chukars (*Alectoris chukar*). Little is known about the diet of migrating eagles in our region. We speculate that during late winter, as eagles migrate through the northern Great Plains, they may prey on pheasants more frequently than in other regions. Certain environmental conditions may cause eagles to focus on pheasants as their main prey, such conditions include: (1) lack of open water, which prevents eagles from their usual diet of fish and waterfowl, (2) availability of other prey, such as cottontail rabbits (*Sylvilagus* spp.) and jackrabbits (*Lepus* spp.), (3) local densities of pheasants, and (4) availability of winter cover. The latter factor may be very important when increasing snow depth denies pheasants adequate refuge from predation.– H. Jeffrey Homan and William J. Bleier, Department of Zoology, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND 58105-5517; and George M. Linz, U. S. Department of Agriculture, Stevens Hall, North Dakota State University, Fargo, ND 58105-5517.