It was a humble beginning — a stretch of open river, a wooden viewing platform overlooking the Mississippi, and a handful of local volunteers wanting to answer visitors’ questions on weekends. With that, Eaglewatch, Inc. was born in 1989. “Local people were noticing visitors coming to town to look at the eagles,” said director of education Scott Mehus, about the birth of Eaglewatch. “It was a way to welcome them and encourage them to visit local restaurants and shops.”

Eaglewatch set the stage for the eagle presentations and one-on-one contact that National Eagle Center staff members have now mastered. Today, each program presenter has a unique style and staff members are constantly on hand to talk with visitors and answer their questions. “There is always somebody in the mew with the eagles,” Mehus said. “It is not because we are trying to watch the birds, it is because we want to engage the visitors coming in. We call it E.A.G.L.E.: eagle answers given live every day.”

By 1991, Eaglewatch and the City of Wabasha built the eagle observation deck on the river in the location where the fountain is today. Trained volunteers, organized by Mary Rivers, took turns on the deck from November to March, answering questions and providing information about eagles. In 1995, Eaglewatch became a non-profit charitable organization with a seven-member board of directors.

“Local people were noticing visitors coming to town to look at the eagles. It was a way to welcome and encourage them to visit local restaurants and shops.”
Based on a study from the year before, City Beach Park and the Big Jo Flour Mill site were merged and the City of Wabasha endorsed a proposal to create the National Eagle Center. The city approved a 99-year lease of the property.

“We opened a small office in 1997,” Mehus explained. “Then in 1999, we moved to Main Street. Mary Beth Garrigan was hired as the executive director, and even though the office was small, we were able to get our first eagle ambassadors. Angel and Harriet came on board in 2000, and Columbia joined us in 2003.”

In 2007, the National Eagle Center celebrated two important events. First, in June, the Department of the Interior removed the bald eagle from the Federal List of Threatened and Endangered Species. Second, the Center held the grand opening of the new building in September.

Bringing in the eagle ambassadors, birds that are non-releasable, was a major development for the Center. It meant visitors could get a better view of eagles.

“There is no other place where you can get that close to an eagle without a barrier,” Mehus said. “Being able to look outside and see another eagle flying by and hear our eagles responding to another eagle in their territory is something that every visitor remembers.”

The live eagles also opened the way for outreach programs to schools, VA facilities, and other organizations. Harriet became a favorite because she stayed calm when she visited people in a variety of situations. She was eventually featured on the Minnesota Support Our Troops license plates.

Mehus is excited about the future plans to add more eagle ambassadors, expand to the other buildings on Main Street, and incorporate the Preston Cook Collection into the experience.

“There are so many ways people connect with eagles,” he said. “It might be being a veteran, or working for the postal service and having an eagle on your truck, or listening to Eagles music. Everyone has a connection to eagles, not just nature lovers.”

Eagle ambassadors need more space

One of the driving forces behind the upcoming expansion of the National Eagle Center has been the need for more space to train and house the eagle ambassadors.

“Our live eagle ambassadors are central to the visitor experience and our overall goal of connecting people to eagles in nature, history, and cultures,” said Rolf Thompson, executive director. “We need a lot more backroom space, I would call it, for training and eventual retirement of birds.”

Having a lot more eagles on display is not necessarily the goal. “Our goal is to have more eagles that we can rotate out,” said Scott Mehus, director of education.

Currently, the National Eagle Center has five eagles with four of them on public exhibit. In order to train new eagles to replace those retiring and to give eagles a chance to have a rest day, more eagles and space are needed. Mehus said that, now, if an eagle goes to a school or other location for a program in the morning and returns to the National Eagle Center, that bird goes right back on display with no time off.

“We have known for a long time that we need more space to have birds who can have days off,” Mehus said. “It takes space to train birds, because it takes anywhere from one to two years to really bring a bird who has been in any rehab facility in and get them ready to do programs in a classroom or do outreach programs.”

More space would help “meet the requests that we get to come to everything from veterans events to senior citizen centers to community festivals,” Thompson said. “We want to be able to say yes to more offers to bring live eagles to places, and we simply don’t have the capacity to meet that demand.”

Q: How quickly do eaglets grow?
Very quickly! They are as large as their parents in just 12 weeks!

Q: How old are eaglets when they learn to fly?
It can vary by eagle, but typically an eaglet will “fledge” - take their first flight - at around 12 weeks of age when they are fully grown.

Q: When do bald eagles get a white head and tail?
It is a gradual process, but for most bald eagles it takes 4-5 years.

Q: How long do bald eagles live?
If an eagle reaches adulthood, 20-25 years is the average lifespan for a wild eagle. For eagles like the eagle ambassadors that have human caretakers, 30-40 years.

Q: Do eagles always live in nests?
No. Eagles only live in nests when they are raising their young. Most of the year they just live in trees, sleeping on branches at night.

For more fascinating eagle facts visit nationaleaglecenter.org/learn/faq