

Winter Eagle Monitoring on Rocky Reach Reservoir



2017

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INTRODUCTION

The Public Utility District No. 1 of Chelan County (Chelan PUD) owns and operates the Rocky Reach Hydroelectric Project along the Columbia River in central Washington. This project operates under Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) license #2145-060. Rocky Reach Dam was licensed in 1957 and began generating electricity in 1961. The operating license was renewed in 2009. As prescribed in the Rocky Reach Wildlife Habitat Management Plan required by Article 403 of the Rocky Reach license and coordination with the Rocky Reach Wildlife Forum (RRWF), Chelan PUD continues to monitor numbers of wintering eagles along Rocky Reach Reservoir (Chelan PUD 2010). This annual report summarizes data collected on wintering bald eagles during January 2017.

HISTORY

From 1975 – 1984, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) conducted monthly aerial surveys for wintering bald eagles along the mid-Columbia River, including Rocky Reach Reservoir (Fielder and Starkey 1980). In 1988, Chelan PUD began regularly monitoring eagles during the winter months along Rocky Reach Reservoir.

The bald eagle was delisted from the Endangered Species Act (ESA) on 9 August 2007. As a result, Chelan PUD reduced the monitoring effort from bi-weekly to monthly during the winter months (November – March) beginning in the winter of 2007-08. The frequency of monitoring exceeded the level suggested in the bald eagle post-delisting monitoring plan (USFWS 2009) and provided sufficient trend information. Winter surveys allow Chelan PUD to determine distribution of wintering eagles along the Reservoir and to determine the age ratio of sub-adults: adults. In 2010, the first Rocky Reach Wildlife Habitat Management Plan was approved and directed Chelan PUD to continue winter bald eagle monitoring as conducted during the first license term. For the 2010 – 2015 Rocky Reach Wildlife Habitat Management Plan (RRWHMP), surveys were conducted monthly. With the recent approval of the 2016 – 2020 RRWHMP, surveys are to be conducted once per winter during January to coincide with the National Mid-winter Bald Eagle Survey (Chelan PUD 2015a).

This report summarizes the monitoring effort conducted under the Rocky Reach Wildlife Habitat Management Plan for January 2017.

STUDY AREA

Rocky Reach Dam is located approximately 7 miles north of the city of Wenatchee, Washington along the Columbia River at river mile 473.5. The pool behind the dam (Reservoir) extends 42 river miles north to Wells Dam (operated by Douglas County PUD) at river mile 515.5. Chelan and Douglas counties border the west and east shores of the reservoir, respectively.

The Reservoir is considered run-of-river with relatively limited water storage capability and active river currents, particularly in the deep main channel of the Columbia River. The Reservoir also has a combination of shallow bays, islands and island complexes, parks, residential, agricultural and natural habitats. Where natural habitat exists, steep cobble or dirt banks comprise much of the reservoir shoreline. Shrub steppe vegetation, fruit orchards, and residential or industrial areas occupy areas up-slope from the riparian edge of the river. Shrub steppe habitat of central Washington is dominated by big sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*), rabbitbrush (*Chrysothamnus* spp.), and bluebunch wheatgrass (*Pseudoroegneria spicata*) and is interspersed with pines such as ponderosa pines (*Pinus*

ponderosa) and Douglas-fir (*Pseudotsuga menziesii*), especially along the hills to the west that comprise the Eastern Cascades Physiographic province (Franklin and Dyrness 1973). Cottonwoods (*Populus balsamifera* ssp. *trichocarpa*) of differing age groups can also be found along the shores of the river.

SURVEY METHODS

Since golden eagles are a sensitive species in Washington State, both bald and golden eagles are documented during the winter survey. Eagle surveys were to be conducted once during January 2017 to coincide within the date ranges for the national Mid Winter Bald Eagle Survey. A minimum of 2 observers were used on each survey. Surveyors on each side (port and starboard) of the boat monitored the respective shoreline (i.e., Chelan or Douglas) and both shorelines were surveyed concurrently while traveling upriver along Rocky Reach Reservoir.

Eagles are identified to species (bald or golden) and age class (adult or sub-adult) whenever possible. Bald eagles were classified as an adult if they exhibited an all-white head or as a sub-adult in any other color phase. Golden eagles were also aged based on plumage characteristics as described in Wheeler & Clark (1995). If age or species of eagles could not be identified, they were recorded as unknown species and/or unclassified age. The location of eagles observed was recorded to the 1/10th river mile as well as bank (Chelan or Douglas) and the perch substrate.

The eagle survey began at the Lincoln Rock State Park boat launch and proceeded along the Douglas County shoreline downriver to Rocky Reach Dam, then across the Reservoir to the Chelan County side and upriver along the Chelan County Shore to the upriver end of Turtle Rock Island (river mile 476). At this point the route crosses back over the main channel and downriver along the west side of Turtle Rock Island. At the downriver end of Turtle Rock Island the boat traveled back upriver, along the east shoreline of Turtle Rock Island and the Douglas County shoreline. From the upriver end of Turtle Rock Island, the survey route then continued upriver to the tailrace at Wells Dam. The river just below Wells Dam is quite wide, making it difficult for surveyors to see adequately from the middle of the river. Therefore, the boat cruised near the Douglas County shore beginning at river mile 515.0. Surveyors focused solely on the Douglas County shoreline at this point, continuing upriver to a safe distance below Wells Dam. After the tailrace area was thoroughly surveyed, the Chelan County shoreline was surveyed downriver to river mile 514.9 where the survey then terminated.

RESULTS

One survey was completed on 16 January 2017. A total of 67 eagles were observed along Rocky Reach Reservoir. Of these, 62 were bald eagles and 5 were golden eagles (Table 1).

Age Ratios

Knowing age ratios of wintering bald eagle populations is important because wintering areas with high proportions of sub-adult bald eagles often indicate an easily available food source which improves the survival chances of younger eagles (Stalmaster 1980, Fitzner et al. 1980, Fielder 1982, Bennetts and McClelland 1991). The number of sub-adult bald eagles observed during the January survey was 26. The age ratio of bald eagles wintering along the Reservoir for the survey was 0.7 sub-adults per adult (Table 1). Eagle observations by species and age class are represented in Figure 1.

Perch Sites and Distribution

Perch substrate was recorded for all eagles observed. Eagles were most commonly observed perched in cottonwoods, Siberian elms, and ponderosa pines during surveys (Table 2). Eagles were distributed fairly evenly along much of the Reservoir. Eagles were more frequently observed in the area between Turtle Rock and Stayman Flats, and also in the Howard Flats vicinity (Corral Creek to Wells Dam) (Figure 2).

National Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Surveys

The 16 January 2017 survey was conducted during the National Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey timeframe (4 – 18 January 2017). The National Mid-Winter Bald Eagle survey is overseen by the United States Geological Survey (USGS) and in coordination with the United States Army Corps of Engineers (ACOE). Data for the survey was submitted via email on 19 January 2017 to Stephen Lesky, ACOE, the Washington State coordinator for the national counts. Chelan PUD has regularly participated in the mid-winter bald eagle counting effort.

Long-term Summary

Over a period of 28 years, (winter of 1988-89 to winter of 2015-16) the average numbers of bald eagles observed wintering along Rocky Reach Reservoir has increased from an average of 16.1 bald eagles/survey (1988-89) to 38.5 bald eagles per survey (2015-16). This increasing trend is shown in Figure 4. The average number of bald eagles observed over this 28 year period is 19.5 bald eagles per survey. The maximum number of wintering bald eagles is typically observed during the month of January or February, with much lower maximum numbers in November, December, and March (Figure 5). The maximum count by month for wintering bald eagles has occurred during January in 12 years (42.8%), during February in 11 years (39.3%), and the same high count was observed during both months in 5 years (17.9%). No maximum counts occurred during November, December or March from 1988-89 through 2014-15. For the 28 year period, the month of January has the highest average number of wintering bald eagles observed with 32.9 bald eagles per survey followed closely by February with 31.8 bald eagles per survey.

DISCUSSION

The number of bald and golden eagles observed during the January 2017 survey was 67. This is higher than the long-term average (1988 - 2015) of 19.5 eagles per survey. The number of bald eagles observed during January 2017 was 62 and the number of golden eagles observed was 5. The ratio of sub-adult: adult bald eagles observed for the January 2017 survey ($n = 0.7$) was higher than the long-term average of 0.56 sub-adults per adult. The total number of wintering bald eagles ($n = 62$) observed during the January 2017 survey is lower than the long-term annual average (AVG = 149) observed since surveys began in 1988-89 (Figure 3). However, only one survey was conducted during the 2017 effort as a result of the reduction in survey effort under the 2016 – 2020 RRWHMP. The maximum number of all eagles observed during the January 2017 survey (MAX = 67) was above the average maximum number (AVG MAX = 40) observed during any survey to date, and equaled the maximum count of bald eagles obtained along the Reservoir during January of 2013 ($n = 62$).

In consultation with the Rocky Reach Wildlife Forum, Chelan PUD reduced its wintering bald eagle effort in 2008 following the delisting of the bald eagle from the ESA in 2007. This change was to continue winter monitoring with reduced effort during the 5-year period following delisting of the bald eagle. Survey effort during the winter months (November – March) was reduced from bi-

weekly to monthly during the 2010 – 2015 RRWHMP (Chelan PUD 2010). As the 5-year period following delisting has passed and wintering bald eagle numbers continue to increase, along with increasing numbers of nesting bald eagles along Rocky Reach Reservoir (Chelan PUD 2015b), the RRWF reduced the number of wintering surveys from once monthly to once per winter for the 2016 – 2020 RRWHMP. The single winter count shall coincide with the National Mid-Winter Bald Eagle survey. Chelan PUD has submitted January survey data annually since 2008 for Rocky Reach Reservoir in conjunction with the National Mid-Winter survey effort. The January effort ensures the peak of the winter season is surveyed and the data set will continue to be shared with the National Mid-Winter Bald Eagle survey coordinators.

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TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Rocky Reach Reservoir bald eagle survey, January 2017.

| Date | Bald eagles | | | Golden eagles | | | | Unknown | | |
|--------|-------------|-------|-------|---------------|-------|------|-------|---------|-----------|------------|
| | Adult | Subad | Total | Adult | Subad | Unkn | Total | Eagle | All Total | subs/adult |
| 16-Jan | 36 | 26 | 62 | 3 | 2 | 0 | 5 | 0 | 67 | 0.7 |

Table 2. Perch detail for bald eagles observed along Rocky Reach Reservoir during 2017.

Golden eagles and eagles observed flying were excluded from analysis.

| Perch Substrate | Total |
|------------------------|--------------|
| Cottonwood | 23 |
| Siberian elm | 8 |
| Ponderosa pine | 6 |
| Utility pole | 4 |
| Shoreline rocks | 3 |
| Alder | 1 |
| Douglas-fir | 1 |
| Willow | 1 |
| Total | 47 |

Figure 1. Age classification of bald and golden eagles along Rocky Reach Reservoir during January 2017.

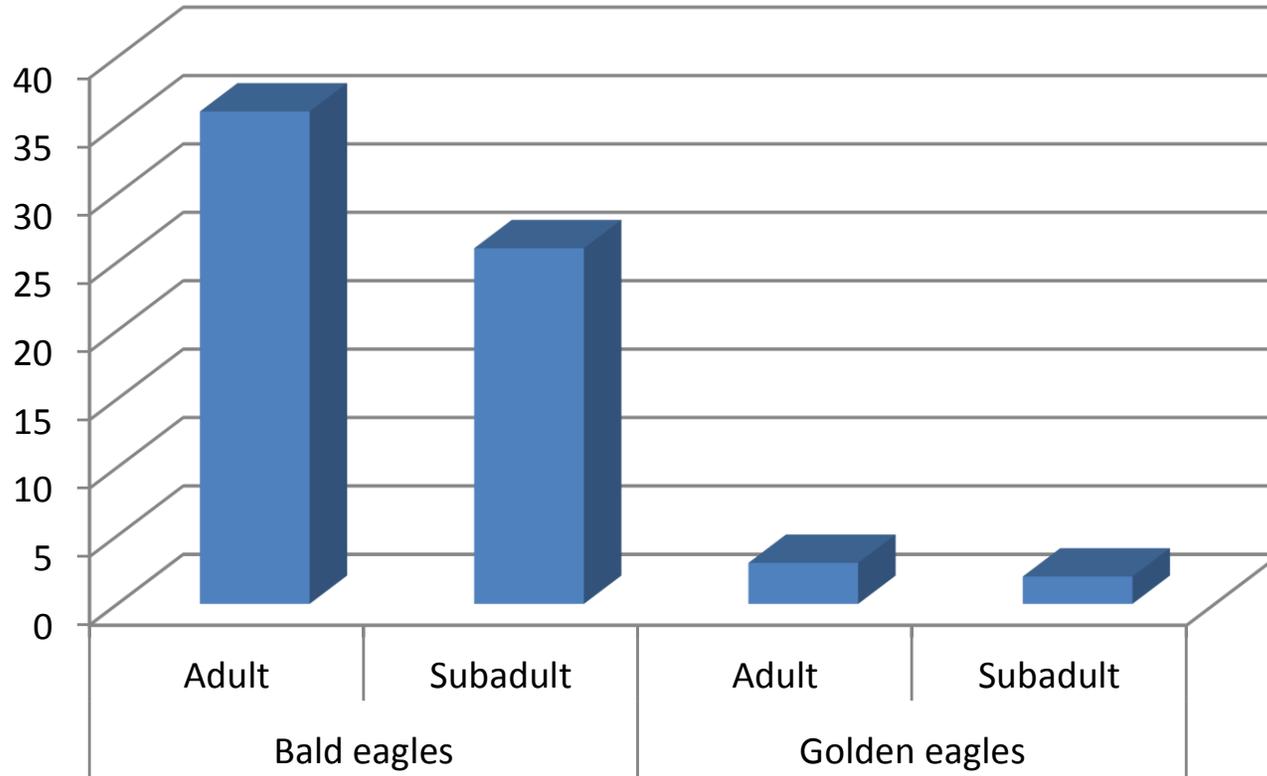


Figure 2. Number of eagle observations (all species) by river mile along Rocky Reach Reservoir during January 2017.

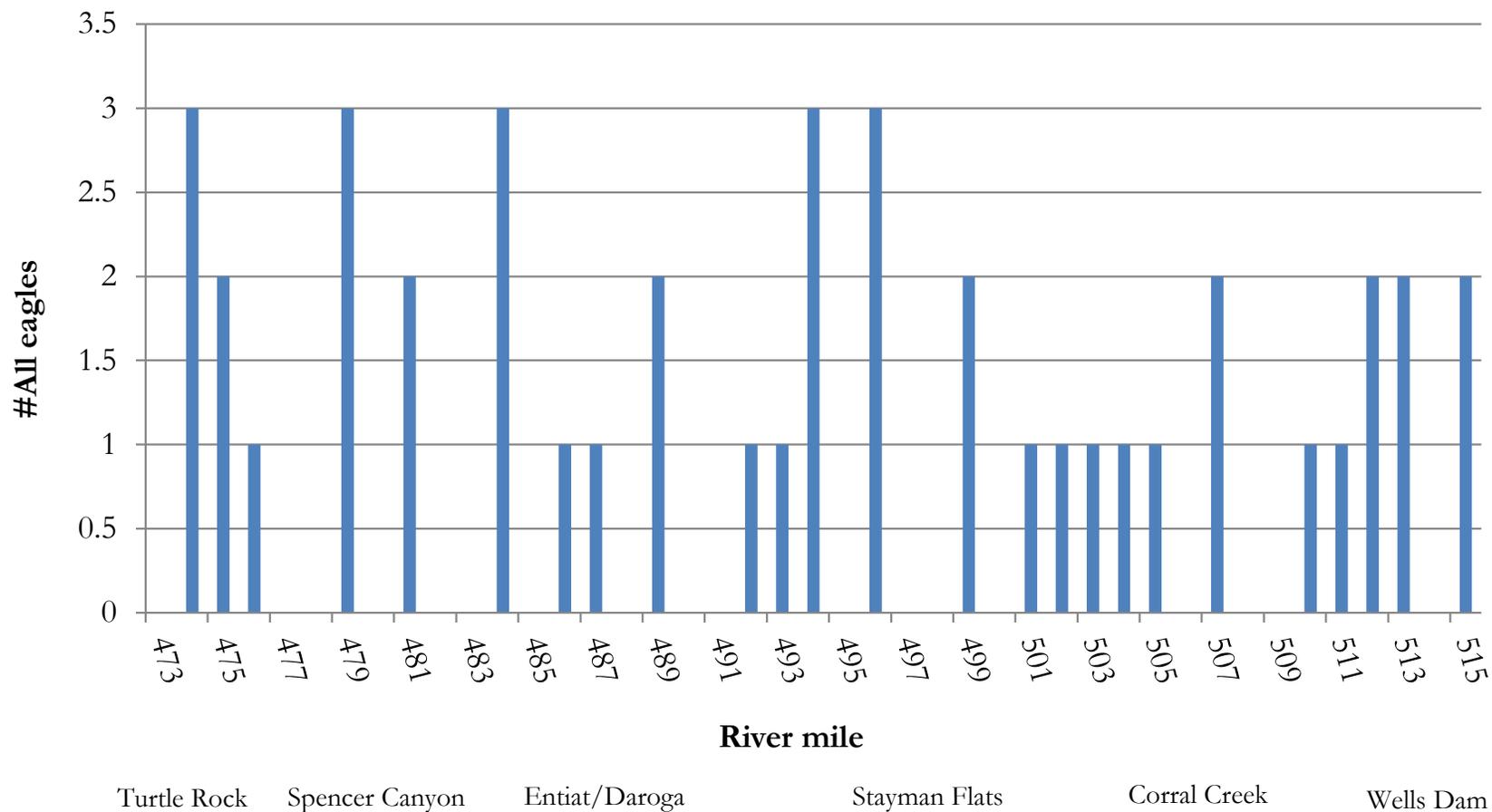


Figure 3. Maximum count of bald eagles obtained during the month of January, 1988 – 2017. The average maximum/survey during all January efforts 1988-2015 is 32 bald eagles. Golden and unknown eagles and were excluded from analysis.

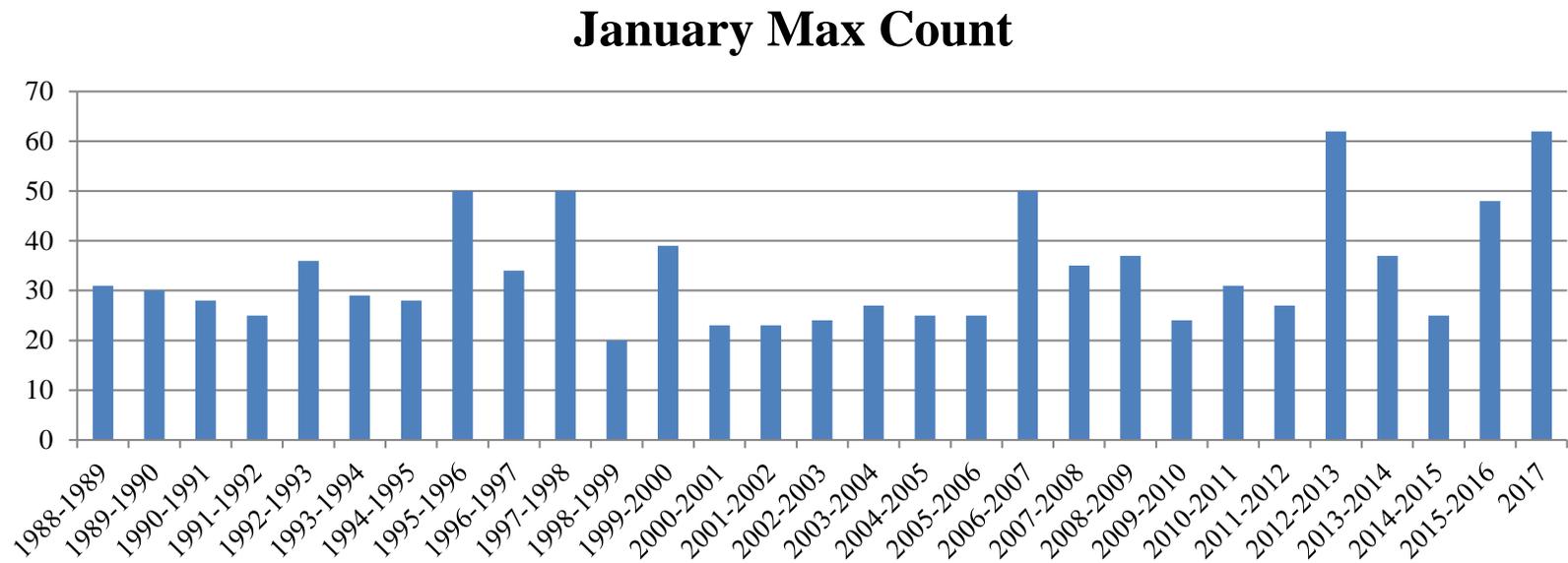


Figure 4. The average number of wintering bald eagles observed along Rocky Reach Reservoir from winter seasons 1988 – 2015 and the long term linear average showing the increase over the 28 year period.

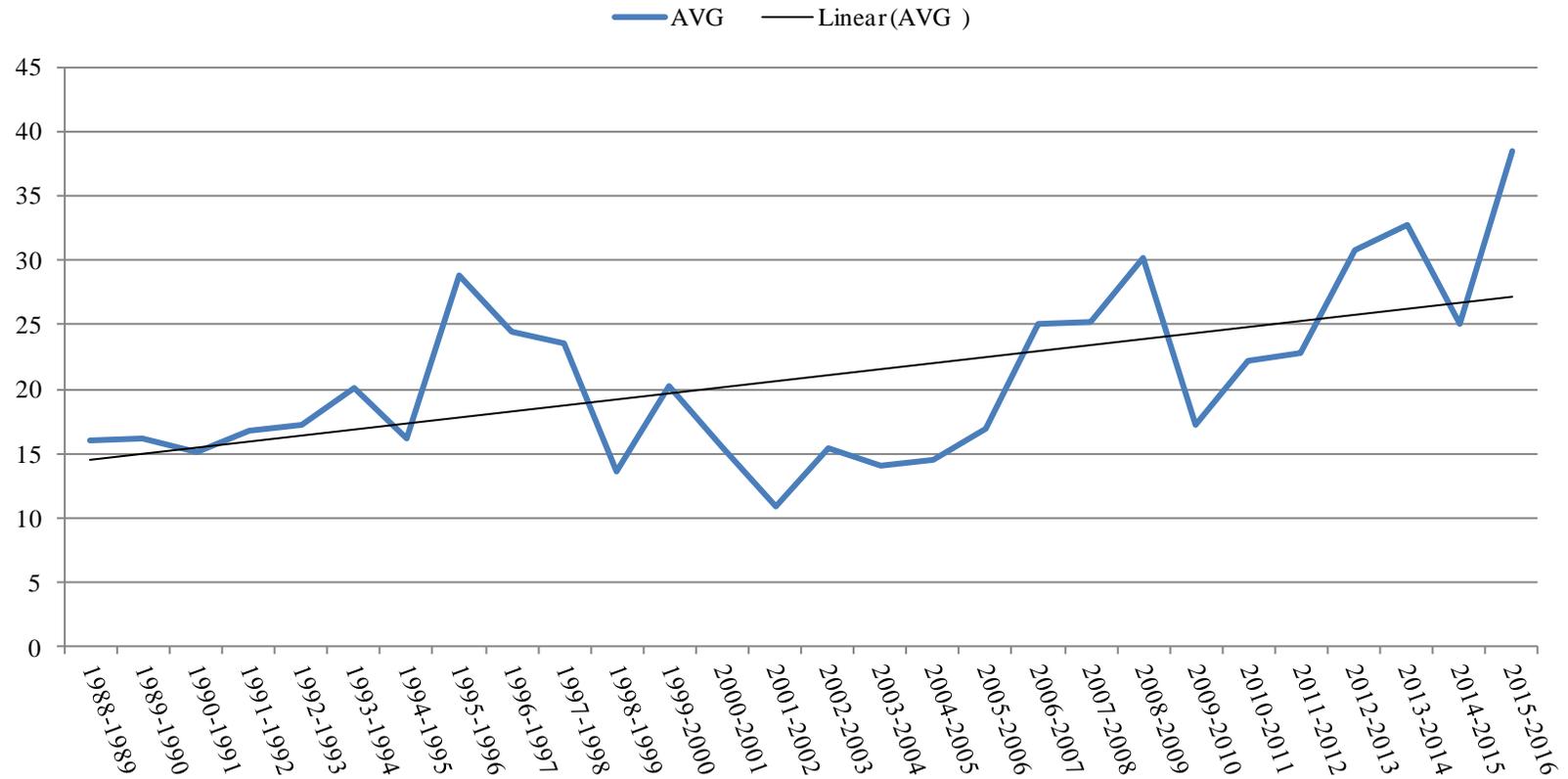


Figure 5. Average maximum number of bald eagles by month along Rocky Reach Reservoir, winter seasons 1988 – 2015.

