

Hawk family creates a flap on Kennecott land

By Amy Joi O'Donoghue - Published: Saturday, June 5, 2010 1:16 a.m. MDT

MAGNA — One family, uninvited, moved in and brought the plans of a mining giant to a standstill.

In the beginning, there may have been a bit of confusion at Rio Tinto's Kennecott Utah Copper, but it was soon replaced with anticipation as workers watched the family's progress.

"We have a pipeline that we are putting in," said Ann Neville, the company's senior adviser for biological resources. "And when they were walking the route, they said a hawk came screeching down out of the sky, and the project manager figured if it was that upset, he'd better call me and see what they should do."

Neville quickly determined that a pair of red-tailed hawks had established a home in a cottonwood tree and likely were expecting babies.

A quick phone call to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service put a kibosh on the pipeline construction because of the birds' migratory status.

"He basically said, 'We do not want you within a half-mile of the nest,'" Neville said, but added that he wanted to know if there were any eggs.

Carefully, and as quietly as possible, workers used a cherry picker to take a sneak peek at the nest.

"Four eggs were seen," Neville said. "And we backed off."

That was in early May.

Kennecott hired a consultant to conduct surveys of the hawks, keeping an eye on them for four hours in the morning for three consecutive days.

About three weeks ago, the four eggs turned into four chicks. Those chicks have started to "branch out," which means they are getting out of the nest a bit, flapping their wings, testing the wind, seeking independence but still relying on Dad and Mom to feed them.

There's a reason human parents sentimentally call it "leaving the nest" when a child turns into an adult and moves out. In hawk terms, they call it obtaining "nest fidelity."

"We are working with fish and wildlife to determine what specific criteria they are looking for in nest fidelity. They may still hang around if there is a lot of food available, like lots of mice," Neville said.

That critical turning point — when the nest can be safely abandoned — will determine when the natural gas pipeline can go in.

"At first, I think it caught everybody up short, and then once the workers realized what was going on, that the hawks were protected, they wanted to do the right thing," Neville said.

"It's been so interesting to watch this, to document everything. Especially now with four chicks that are nearly as big as the adults still trying to fit in the same nest."

Although the hawks' presence has created uncertainty about the start-up date of the pipeline installation, Kennecott spokeswoman Jana Kettering said the questions have taken on a new flavor.

"I have heard about the red-tailed hawk family in more than a dozen meetings — with people asking how are the babies, how are the chicks. It's like we're protecting our own — and taking care of the wildlife on our land."

e-mail: amyjoi@desnews.com