

Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

BY KATHLEEN WOHLFORT AND MARGARET FOWLE



Bald eagles are large, long-lived predatory birds and one of two species of eagles native to North America. Eagles are a member of the accipiter family, which also includes hawks, kites, and some vultures.

The bald eagle's range extends throughout most of North America, with the largest population in Alaska. Bald eagles primarily eat fish but they will also feed on carrion, mammals, turtles, and waterfowl. Northern bald eagles winter in coastal and inland areas where they can access open water.

Bald eagles build large nests in trees at least 50–60 feet above the ground along shorelines in relatively remote areas, and tend to use the same breeding areas year after year. Eagles incubate one to three eggs for approximately 35 days in the early spring. The chicks take their first flight from the nest at 11–12 weeks old. Adults continue to care for the young eagles up to three months after fledging, until they are able to hunt on their own. The entire breeding cycle lasts at least 6 months.

Bald eagles have wingspans of 6 to 7 feet. Young eagles retain their dark brown, immature plumage for several years, and acquire the famous white head and tail in their fourth or fifth year, when they reach sexual maturity. While the female is generally larger than the male, the two sexes look identical.

Bald eagles suffered declines beginning in the mid to late 1800s. Biologists estimated that there were as many as 100,000 bald eagles in the lower 48 states before Europeans first arrived. Population declines coincided with European settlement due to competition for the same habitat and food sources. Trophy and feather collection and shooting extirpated some eagle populations. The passage of the Bald Eagle Protection Act in 1940 slowed declines in most areas.

The most drastic population decline occurred in the mid 1900s, mostly from the egg thinning effects of the pesticide DDT. By the early 1960s, fewer than 100 bald eagles were nesting in the northeastern U.S. New York's population decreased from an estimated 72 nesting pairs to 1 nesting pair in the 1960s, and Maine's population was down to 29 pairs in 1972.

In response to this decline the bald eagle was listed as an endangered species in 1967.

Efforts to restore bald eagle populations to North America have been extremely successful, thanks to the ban on DDT, extensive reintroduction programs, and the protection of critical breeding and wintering habitat.

The bald eagle was down-listed to threatened status in all lower 48 states in 1995, and was proposed to be delisted in 1999. The delisting proposal was reopened in 2006, and it is expected

that eagle will be delisted in 2007.

In 2003, National Wildlife Federation's Northeastern Natural Resource Center collaborated to begin the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative. The Initiative's objectives are to help establish a breeding population of eagles in the Lake Champlain Basin, and to strengthen public awareness of the role eagles and other top predators play in Vermont.

Reintroduction projects involve a process called hacking, which has successfully restored populations of eagles and peregrine falcons throughout the U.S. The first eagles released in 2003 will be ready to breed in 2008. Until then, the projects partners are focusing on surveying the Lake Champlain Basin for breeding eagles, and continuing to educate the public about eagle conservation. Since the project's inception, one pair of adult eagles established a territory in southeastern Vermont. They nested for the first time in 2006, but did not raise any young. The return of nesting eagles to Vermont is a powerful signal to all that the decades of work protecting habitat, improving water quality, and increasing public awareness are making a difference.

For more information on NWF efforts to protect and restore eagles, contact Margaret Fowle, fowle@nwf.org, or go to www.nwf.org/wildlife or www.cvps.org/eagles.



Eagle chicks will take their first flight at 11-12 weeks; they will hunt on their own at 3 months.

PHOTOS BY STEVE HILLEBRAND AND DAVE MENKE; U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE.