

# **Bald Eagle Success Story**

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Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

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While recently driving toward the Visitor Center early one morning, I was greeted by our nation's most recognizable symbol – the bald eagle. It posed in the top of a dead pine tree along the main entrance road, an unlikely spot for a bird whose habitat usually includes estuaries, large lakes, and rivers. The sun just peeked over the trees, and enveloped the eagle in that magical light that lasts for only a few precious moments. As if on cue, as the sun rose higher and the moment passed, the great bird took a last look around and effortlessly soared west toward the refuge of the swamp.

The excitement that filled my being stems from a true success story announced just before this rare sighting. On June 28, 2007, Secretary of the Interior Dirk Kempthorne announced the removal of the bald eagle from the threatened and endangered species list. Just forty short years ago, the bald eagle almost disappeared from the earth. Habitat loss, illegal shooting and poisoning from lead shot, and contamination of food sources, primarily from DDT and its derivatives, all contributed to the eagle's steady decline. By 1963, only 417 nesting pairs remained.

Through passage of the Bald Eagle Protection Act in 1940, the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966, and the Endangered Species Act of 1973, safeguards were put into motion to begin the process of saving our nation's symbol. Today, there are nearly 10,000 nesting pairs of bald eagles in the contiguous United States.

The last nesting bald eagle recorded in the Okefenokee NWR occurred in 1957 near Buzzards Roost Lake. Recent sightings occur sporadically in and near the refuge, including Chesser Prairie, the St. Marys River and the Chesser Island Landfill, located near the east entrance. Bald eagles are seen more frequently here during winter months, where they congregate near open water in tall trees for spotting prey and night roosts for sheltering.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) is the principal agency charged with conservation of endangered species. As a division under FWS, National Wildlife Refuges are the world's largest collection of lands and waters specifically managed for fish and wildlife. The Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established in 1936 as a refuge and breeding ground for migratory birds and other wildlife. Staff currently manage habitat for endangered and threatened species such as the red cockaded woodpecker, gopher tortoise, and indigo snake. The overwhelming success of the bald eagle gives hope that perhaps one day we will see the permanent return of this majestic symbol to the Okefenokee NWR.