



Bald Eagle

(Haliaeetus leucophalus)

Species description: The bald eagle is the second largest North American bird of prey with an average 7-foot wingspan. It has a distinctive white head and white tail offset against a dark brown body and wings in adult birds. Females are about 25% larger than males; sexes are otherwise similar in appearance.



Breeding Habitat: Bald eagle nest site selection varies widely from deciduous, coniferous, and mixed forest stands. Nest trees are usually large diameter trees characterized by open branching and stout limbs. Nests are in dominant or codominant trees often located near a break in the forest such as a burn, clearcut, field edge (including agricultural fields), or water. While only one nest is used at a given time, a pair may build more than one nest within their territory. The majority of nest sites are within 1/2 mile of a body of water such as coastal shorelines, bays, rivers, lakes, farm ponds, dammed up rivers (i.e., beaver dams, log jams, etc.) and have an unobstructed view of the water. Bald eagle habitat occurs primarily in undeveloped areas with little human activity.

Background: Bald eagles in the lower 48 states were first protected in 1940 by the Bald Eagle Protection Act and then were federally listed as endangered in 1967. In 1995, the bald eagle was reclassified as threatened in all of the lower 48 States. The bald eagle was proposed for delisting on July 6, 1999 and was removed from the Endangered Species List in June of 2007.

Food habits: The bald eagle is an opportunistic predator that feeds primarily on fish but also takes a variety of birds, mammals, and turtles (both live and as carrion) when fish are less abundant or these other species are readily available. Waterfowl are the most common avian prey, but shorebirds and landbirds are also eaten. A variety of mammals are also taken as prey, although mammals are less important than fish and birds. Mammals are taken as live prey or carrion in all seasons but become more important during the winter months.

Historical Status/Current Trends: The bald eagle is the only eagle unique to North America. It ranges from central Alaska and Canada down to northern Mexico. The majority of nesting bald eagles in Oregon occur in the following areas: Columbia River below Portland, the Oregon coast and Coast Range, the High Cascades, the Klamath Basin, and the upper Willamette River Basin. Wintering bald eagles are found throughout the State but concentrations occur in areas with dependable food supplies such as Klamath and Harney Basins and along the Snake and Columbia Rivers.

Life History: As our national symbol, the bald eagle is widely recognized. Its distinctive white head and tail do not appear until the bird is four to five years old. These large, powerful raptors can live for 30 or more years in the wild and even longer in captivity. Bald eagles may range over long distances, although adults may remain near their territories if adequate forage is available year round. They build huge nests near the tops of tall trees in January and February. Nests are often reused year after year, and with additions made annually, the nests can become enormous. Bald eagles lay one to four eggs in late March or early April and both adults incubate the eggs for about 35 days until hatching. During the nest building, egg laying and incubating periods, eagles are extremely sensitive and will abandon a nesting attempt if there are excessive disturbances in the area during this time. The eaglets are able to fly in about three months and then, after a month, they are on their own. The first year is particularly difficult for young eagles. Only half may survive the first year due to disease, lack of food, bad weather, or human interference.

Wintering: Winter season foraging areas are usually located near open water on rivers, lakes, reservoirs, and bays where fish and waterfowl are abundant, or in areas with little or no water (i.e., range-lands, barren land, tundra, suburban areas, etc.) where other prey species (e.g., rabbit, rodents, deer, carrion) are abundant. Communal roost sites contain large trees (standing snags and utility poles have also been used) with stout lower horizontal branches for perching. Roost sites may be used at night and during the day, especially during inclement weather, by three to greater than one hundred bald eagles. Perch trees used during the day possess the same characteristics as roost trees but are located closer to foraging areas. The Bear Valley National Wildlife Refuge is heavily utilized as a night roost during the winter months. As many as one thousand wintering bald eagles have been counted in the Klamath Falls area.



Reasons for Decline: The major factor leading to the decline and subsequent listing of the bald eagle was disrupted reproduction resulting from contamination by organochlorine pesticides. The decline of the bald eagle coincided with the introduction of the pesticide DDT in 1947. Eagles contaminated with DDT failed to lay eggs or produced thin eggshells that broke during incubation. Other causes of decline included shooting, trapping, and poisoning. Other causes of death in bald eagles have included shooting, electrocution, impact injuries, and lead poisoning. Loss of habitat and human disturbance are potential threats. Habitat loss results from the physical alteration of habitat as well as from human disturbance associated with development or recreation (i.e., hiking, camping, boating, and ORV use). Activities that can and have negatively impacted bald eagles include logging, mining, recreation, overgrazing (particularly in riparian habitats), road construction, wetland filling, suburban & vacation home developments, and industrial development. These activities are particularly damaging when they occur in shoreline habitats. Activities that produce increased siltation and industrial pollution can cause dissolved oxygen reductions in aquatic habitats, reductions in bald eagle fish prey populations followed by reductions in the number of eagles. Not all developments in floodplain habitats are detrimental to bald eagles, as some reservoirs and dams have created new habitat with dependable food supplies.



Conservation Measures: The decline of the bald eagle was recognized by 1940, prompting efforts to protect the eagle and its habitat through public awareness and involvement. Restrictions on the use of organochlorine pesticides in the early 1970s improved reproductive success, but lingering residues continue to affect eagle populations in some areas. In the 1970s and 1980s, captive breeding and reintroduction programs were used to restock wild populations in certain areas of the country and helped to reestablish a broader distribution of birds. Although habitat loss and residual contamination remain a threat to the bald eagle's full recovery, breeding populations in most areas of the country are making encouraging progress. The following continue to be important conservation measures:

1. Avoid disturbance to nests during the nesting season: January - August
2. Avoid disturbance to roosts during the wintering season: November - March
3. Protect riparian areas from logging, cutting, or tree clearing.
4. Protect fish and waterfowl habitat in bald eagle foraging areas
5. Development of site-specific management plans to provide for the long-term availability of habitat.

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<http://www.fws.gov/klamathfallsfwo/>

Links and References

Bald Eagle Survey data can be found at the following websites:

http://srf.srfs.usgs.gov/research/indivproj.asp?SRFSPProj_ID=2

<http://ocid.nacse.org/nbii/eagles/>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Division of Migratory Bird Management Eagle website:

<http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/BaldEagle.htm>

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Region 3 Bald Eagle website: <http://midwest.fws.gov/eagle/>