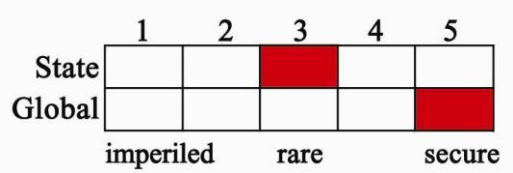
Rare Animals of Louisiana

Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Rarity Rank: S2N,S3B/G5



Identification:

- A very large raptor
- Adult with dark brown body, white head and tail, and large, yellow bill
- Immatures are dark brown with pale underwing coverts, irregular light base of tail and black bill
- Subadults intermediate between immatures and adults and exhibit various amounts of white mottling on body
- 4 to 5 years required to attain adult plumage
- Wings very long, broad and rounded at the tip with primary feathers often widely separated; wings held flat when soaring
- Adults to 1.1 m in length with wingspread to 2.3 m

Habitat:

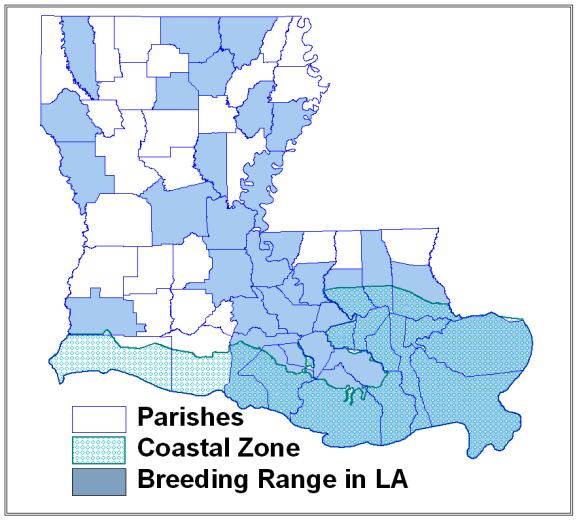
- Nests primarily in the tops of cypress trees near open water
- Feeds in open lakes

Food habits:

Feeds on fish, either self-caught or robbed from other birds (especially ospreys), as well as carrion, waterfowl, coots, muskrats and nutria

Range:

- Breeds throughout the United States, southern Canada and Baja California, although it is rare away from the coast
- Winters throughout the United States along river system, large lakes, or coastal areas
- In Louisiana, nests primarily in southeastern coastal parishes and, occasionally on large lakes in northern and central parishes, but these nests are less successful



Range based on occurrences in Natural Heritage database

Reproduction:

- Louisiana birds nest in winter and early spring
- Nests very large (up to 2.5 m across and 3.5 m deep) and used year after year

- Alternate nests may be constructed by breeding pair, and the birds may alternate between the two nests annually
- Usually up to 3 eggs per clutch
- Incubation period about 35 days; young fledge 72 to 78 days after hatching

Threats:

- Accumulation of pesticide residues (especially DDT) caused thinning of egg shells, which reduced reproductive success rate
- Loss of habitat
- Human disturbances to nesting pairs during nesting season

Beneficial Management Practices:

- Annual nesting surveys conducted to determine productivity
- Midwinter surveys of non-nesting birds
- Hacking program, where newly hatched young are moved to areas with no eagles, hand reared, and released, in hope that they will return to the release site to nest
- Protection of nest sites through Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries' Natural Areas Registry Program

LA River Basins:

Atchafalaya, Barataria, Mississippi, Ouachita, Pearl, Pontchartrain, Red, Sabine, Terrebonne, Vermilion-Teche

Bald Eagle Nest

Photo by Larry Korhnak

Funding provided by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries and the Barataria-Terrebonne National Estuary Program