

Bald Eagle Fact Sheet

Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

New York Status: **Threatened**

Federal Status: **Threatened**

Description

The bald eagle was adopted as the symbol of the United States because of its independence and strength. One of the largest birds of prey (raptors) found in North America, bald eagles stand about 30 inches (76 cm) high, sport a wingspan of 72-84 inches (1.8-2.1 m), and weigh between 8 and 14 pounds (3.6-6.4 kg).

This majestic bird is easily identified in adult plumage by its unmistakable brown body set off by a white head and tail and bright yellow bill (male and female eagles look identical, except that the female is usually about one third larger and heavier than the male, as is typical in birds of prey). Sexual maturity and the characteristic white head and tail are achieved at five years of age.

The word *bald* in the eagle's name comes from a word in Old English that means white headed.



Adult bald eagle



Juvenile bald eagle

Immature bald eagles lack the white head and tail. They are mostly chocolate brown with varying amounts of white over the body, tail, and underwings. Juvenile bald eagles are often mistaken for immature golden eagles, which are much rarer in New York.

Despite their fierce image, bald eagles are actually quite timid and opportunistic. Since their primary prey is fish, bald eagles are sometimes called *sea eagles*, though they will take some mammals, waterfowl, seabirds and carrion, especially during winter.

Life History

The bald eagle is a long-lived bird, with a life span in the wild of more than 30 years. Bald eagles mate for life, returning to nest in the general area (within 250 miles) from which they fledged. Once a pair selects a nesting territory, they use it for the rest of their lives.

Bald eagles' aerial courtship is an amazing display of avian abilities. The pair soars high in the sky, begins a dive, and interlocks talons while descending in a series of somersaults. Bald eagles produce only one or two offspring per year, rarely three. In New York, the young fledge by mid to late summer at about 12 weeks of age. By 20 weeks they are largely independent.

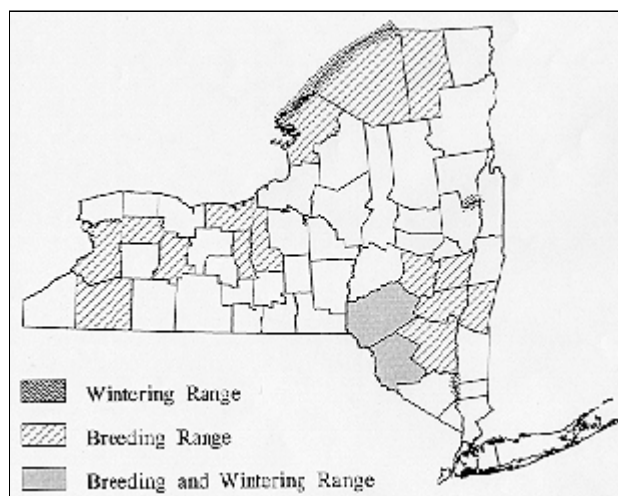


Eaglets on their nest

A bald eagle nest is a large structure, usually located high in a tall, live white pine tree near water. The nest is reused and added to (decorated) each year, often becoming eight or more feet deep, six feet across, and weighing hundreds of pounds.

Bald Eagle Distribution and Habitat

Bald eagles are wholly North American, and currently are found in every state except Hawaii, as well as throughout Canada. Eagles prefer undisturbed areas near large lakes and reservoirs, marshes and swamps, or stretches along rivers where they can find open water and their primary food, fish.



Historically, bald eagles nested in forests along the shorelines of oceans, lakes or rivers throughout most of North America, often moving south in winter to areas where water remained open. Prior to the 1900s, they used as many as 80 nest sites in New York, primarily in the northern and western parts of the state.

Wintering grounds are from southern Canada south, along major river systems, in intermountain regions, and in the Great Plains. Many hydroelectric plants, including some in New York, provide suitable wintering habitat for bald eagles.

Distribution of bald eagles in New York

Status

Bald eagles always have been seen as competitors with humans for important wild food sources and as threats to farm animals - at one time, bounties were even offered for killing them.

In the last century, reproductive impairment from pesticides (especially DDT) and heavy metals caused virtual extirpation of the few remaining bald eagles in New York and many other areas. Persistent and toxic compounds in fish from contaminated waters built up to high levels in the eagles' bodies, interfering with the deposition of calcium in their eggshells and making many of the eggs infertile. Since the 1972 ban on DDT, eagles and other birds of prey are once again producing young.

However, there has been no reduction in the human activity most damaging to eagle populations - destruction of habitat by logging and development along watercourses. Even recently, extensive human activity within preferred eagle habitats has disturbed important nest areas, resulting in reproductive failure and nest abandonment.

Bald Eagle Restoration, Research and Management

The New York State Bald Eagle Restoration Project began in 1976 in an attempt to reestablish a breeding population through *hacking* (hand rearing to independence). Over a 13 year period, 198 nestling bald eagles were collected (most from Alaska), transported and released in New York.

The hacking project ended in 1989, when it accomplished its goal of establishing ten breeding pairs. The bald eagle program's focus has now shifted to finding and protecting nesting pairs in New York, and monitoring their productivity. Bald eagles continue to do well; in 2005 New York had 92 breeding pairs, which fledged 112 young. Each year, New York's bald eagles fledge about 10 percent more young eagles than the year before.

Hopes are high that bald eagles will continue to expand in New York and elsewhere, repopulating areas from which they have disappeared. In the meantime, our challenge is to secure sufficient suitable eagle habitat and to limit human disturbance within these habitats, allowing the species to continue to live and expand in New York.



Eaglets in the hacking cage

Sound the Alarm, Support the Eagles

If you see someone harassing or injuring an eagle, or if you spot destruction of eagle habitat or find an injured or dead eagle, report it at once to DEC's Endangered Species Unit at the address on this page.

Support legislation that helps protect the eagle and its habitat. Become an active participant in local planning and development.

Immature bald eagle in flightSupport organizations that work towards conservation of eagles and all wildlife.



Additional References

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Immature bald eagle in flight

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