

Golden Eagle

Also quite rare in the East, the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) is fiercer and more wild than the bald eagle. Historically, golden eagle populations have been low. Intense campaigns of elimination in the past and possible recent pesticide contamination have reduced their numbers to an estimated total population of 4,000 to 5,000 pairs. Most golden eagles nest in the uplands of northern Canada, Alaska and the western United States. In the eastern United States they range from New England through the Appalachian Mountains to Georgia, but recorded nests are few.



Adult golden eagle

43 to 45 days. At 9 to 10 weeks of age, the eaglets, each weighing from 9 to 12½ pounds, leave the nest. Adult birds weigh approximately 12 pounds and have a wingspan of 6½ to 7½ feet.

These majestic birds are seldom heard, but they do occasionally give a yelping bark. Rabbits constitute the majority of a golden eagle's diet, but they also eat chipmunks, ground squirrels, mice, groundhogs and sometimes grouse. They have also been known to eat carrion, and on rare

occasions, will attack healthy pigs, sheep, deer or other large mammals.

Identification

Adult: There is a golden wash to the feather tips of the head and neck, and a slight lightening at the base of the tail. Their cere (the swollen area about the nostrils above the beak) and feet are yellow. Look for legs feathered to the toes and, while in flight, soaring with wings flat with only occasional wing beats.

Immature: Their tails have a broad white band with a black band at the end. The primary (outer wing) feathers are white at the base. On the underside there is white showing at the "wrists" of the wings.



Adult golden eagle showing golden feather tips.

Remember

Bald and golden eagles are protected by both state and federal laws. It is against the law to "harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect" these birds. Presence at the nest site during the nesting season is also considered a form of harassment. West Virginia law states that anyone who violates the provisions of this act is guilty of a misdemeanor, and will be fined not less than \$500 nor more than \$5,000 or imprisoned not less than 60 days nor more than a year.

One half of this fine shall be paid to any person or persons providing information that leads to an arrest. Federal fines and imprisonment are more stringent. Report information to your local conservation officer or the Wildlife Resources Section's Wildlife Diversity Program at 304-637-0245. All communications will be kept confidential.

If you see a bald eagle in West Virginia, especially pairs of birds during the breeding season (February through June); please report your sightings to the address listed below.



www.wvdnr.gov

Cover photo of bald eagle by Steve Hillebrand,USFWS

Wildlife Diversity Program

Wildlife Resources
West Virginia Division of
Natural Resources

P.O. Box 67
Elkins, WV 26241
(304) 637-0245
Fax: (304) 637-0250

It is the policy of the Division of Natural Resources to provide its facilities, services, programs, and employment opportunities to all persons without regard to sex, race, age, religion, national origin or ancestry, disability, or other protected group status.

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Eagles of West Virginia



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Eagles of West Virginia



Jack Mills©

The American Bald Eagle

Adopted as our national symbol in 1782, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) was declared an endangered species in the lower 48 states in 1969. The number of these powerful birds of prey declined primarily due to the loss of suitable habitat, which consists of tall mature trees near clear waters, and, most importantly, isolation.

Habitat loss was not the only cause. Eagles were also affected by the widespread use of the pesticide DDT beginning in the late 1940s and continuing through the early 1970s. DDT caused female eagles to lay eggs with abnormally thin shells which greatly increased the likelihood that the eggs would break during incubation. Also adding to their decline were humans who killed them because they saw these birds as marauders which killed livestock.

Large predatory birds have never been numerous. Some sources say there may have

been a quarter of a million bald eagles in the lower 48 states a century ago. Only 417 nesting pairs could be located in 1963. The current estimated population is more than 4,000 pairs of adults and another 5,000 to 6,000 juvenile birds. Because of the progress that has been made, the bald eagle was down-listed to threatened status in all the lower 48 states in 1995.

Bald eagles are rare in West Virginia in all seasons. Occasional summer residents are sighted, usually in the vicinity of the Potomac River. During fall migration, bald eagles may be seen all across the state, but most observations come from the mountains where birds follow the ridges southward.

In the spring of 1981, the first recorded bald eagle nest in West Virginia was discovered along the



Immature bald eagles

USFWS Photo

South Branch of the Potomac River. Each year the pair raised their young in this nest until sometime late in 1985 when the large nest was blown down in a storm. The pair then built a new nest not far away and continued their successful nesting record. Since the first nest was discovered, the number of nesting birds has increased.

In 2005, 19 pairs attempted to nest, and 14 of these nests were successful in fledging young eagles. The nests were located in the Potomac River drainage in Grant, Hampshire, Hardy, Jefferson, Mineral and Pendleton counties. In addition, the DNR received a report of a pair of eagles attempting to nest in Hancock County in the Ohio River drainage, but birds were not present when the site was visited. Non-breeding eagles have been seen in most areas of the state. DNR biologists monitor these bald eagle nests every year and continue to search for new nests.

Life History

Bald eagles mate for life, and both birds share the responsibilities of incubating the eggs and feeding the young birds. Nesting begins in late February, often at a site that has been used for several years. Sticks are added to the nest each year so it increases in size. In 1984 the South Branch nest was 5¼ feet in diameter and 2¾ feet deep. The parents line the inside of the nest with fine grasses and moss.

Incubation of the two or three eggs lasts about 35 days. After the eggs hatch, both parents feed the nestlings. One guards the nest while the other hunts. At around 10 to 13 weeks of age the eaglets, weighing nine to 12 pounds, leave



Steve Shulata, Jr.

Adult bald eagle at nest with fledglings.

the nest. They will not become sexually mature and attain the adult's white head and tail feathers until four to five years of age. Bald eagles usually return to within 100 miles of where they were hatched to nest and raise young of their own.

An adult bald eagle is 2½ feet in length and has a wingspan of 6½ to 7 feet. The voice of the bald eagle, a high-pitched squeaky chatter, belies its majestic appearance and size.

Bald eagles feed mainly on fish, but they are opportunistic feeders that will also eat waterfowl, small mammals, reptiles, and even carrion (dead animals), including an occasional road-killed deer.

Identification

Adult: The sexes are alike in appearance with a yellow bill and feet, black talons, golden eyes, and white head and tail feathers. The female is usually slightly larger than the male.

Immature: The tail, head and body feathers are mottled brown with some white in the wing linings. The talons and bill are yellow.



Steve Shulata, Jr.

Adult bald eagle