



Bald Eagle

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



USFWS

Bald Eagle

(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

Celebrated as the national symbol of the United States since 1872, the bald eagle was once listed as an endangered species. Benjamin Franklin accused the bird of “bad moral character” because of its habits of stealing fish from ospreys and scavenging carrion. *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* means “sea eagle with a white head.” Like other sea eagles, the bald eagle lives near water and relies on powerful wings and talons to scavenge fish, its main source of food. Once endangered by pesticides and hunting, the bald eagle has made a stunning comeback and was removed from the Endangered Species List in 2007.

Description

One of the largest raptors in North America, the bald eagle weighs 8 to 13 pounds; the female is larger than the male. The wingspan may be 7 or 8 feet across, and the bird’s body can stretch 3 feet from beak to tail. Juveniles are uniformly dark brown or mottled, with dark beaks, talons and eyes. In flight, the underside of the juvenile’s wings may be streaked or mottled with white feathers. The bald eagle isn’t “bald”; its name comes from the white feathers over the entire head. After four to five years, the birds achieve full adult plumage and coloring: a brilliant white head, neck and tail; bright yellow beak and feet; and pale yellow eyes. Bald eagles hold their wings flat when soaring high in the sky, unlike vultures and other large birds whose wings make a slight vee.

History and Status

As far back as 1700, explorer John Lawson found bald eagles plentiful along North Carolina waterways but divided them into two species, the “eagle bald” (bald meaning white) and the “eagle gray,” which was actually the juvenile of the species. Settlers and bounty hunters shot and trapped great numbers of the birds, and by the end of the 19th century the bald eagle population had declined throughout North America. In 1940 Congress passed the Bald Eagle Act, protecting the bird from further destruction. Still, populations plummeted in the 1940s and ‘50s after the pesticide DDT was introduced. The chemical accumulated in the food chain of eagles and other birds, resulting in thin eggshells that cracked when the parents attempted to brood their eggs. Once DDT was banned, bald eagles started slowly repopulating suitable habitats near lakes, rivers and sounds.

Habitats & Habits

The bald eagle prefers habitat near lakes, large rivers, and shorelines of sounds and bays. The bird requires tall, isolated trees for perching and nesting. Its large wings

Once listed as an endangered species, the bald eagle is now found throughout the state.



Adult bald eagle (Photo: Mark Buckler)

Range and Distribution

Native only to North America, the bald eagle was once abundant in both the East and West, from Canada to the Gulf Coast. Once extirpated from much of its range, it has now made a comeback on its own and through reintroduction programs in some states, including North Carolina. Bald eagles are found across the state, mainly near large bodies of water. They are a common sight at Jordan and Falls lakes in the Piedmont and at Lake Mattamuskeet in Hyde County.

Range Map



■ Bald Eagle Range

Bald Eagle

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Habitats & Habits (continued)

are adapted for catching late-morning and midday thermal updrafts, which give a high-altitude vantage point for seeking out and scavenging fish and other foods. Opportunistic by nature, the eagle is fond of stealing food from ospreys and other birds, and it scavenges the shoreline for dead or dying fish, as well as plucking them live from the water. In winter, when food is scarce, bald eagles consume a wider variety of prey, including water birds, rabbits and carrion. The bald eagle needs a tall, living tree for its huge nest, preferably a tree with a stout vee or several branches making a sturdy crotch. Nests are up to 8 feet wide and 20 feet deep, made of sticks and lined with grasses. Pairs often return and layer new nest material over the old from year to year, with the nest growing in size over time.

NCWRC & Human Interactions

In 1982, the N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission began a “hacking” program, which involved raising eagles in captivity and reintroducing them in the wild. Young eagles were released near Lake Mattamuskeet in Hyde County. Commission biologists monitored the juveniles and in 1984, North Carolina’s first post-DDT wild bald eagle nest was documented 7 miles from the lake.

While Commission biologists no longer raise eagles and release them, they do continue to monitor and identify the locations of new bald eagle nests and provide technical guidance to landowners about how to protect bald eagles and their nesting sites. In most circumstances, biologists are able to work with these landowners to protect the eagle nesting sites without substantially interfering with the landowners’ objectives. They also meet with timber companies to discuss logging operations around eagle nests.

These days people enjoy watching the bald eagle’s soaring flight near non-breeding roosts at Piedmont lakes and near the coast. Because of their similar size and habits, ospreys are often mistaken for bald eagles by casual observers. Unlike ospreys, however, bald eagles usually build their nests far away from boat traffic or human habitation. Despite the eagle’s comeback in North Carolina, its population will be limited by the number of suitable roosting and nesting sites and the availability of fish, but we can expect the population to continue to grow for many years.

References

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Credits

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Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Falconiformes

Average Size

Body: Up to 3 feet long, beak to tail

Wingspan: 7 to 8 feet

Weight: 8 to 13 pounds

Food

Bald eagles feed on fish, turtles, waterbirds, small mammals and carrion. They usually scavenge sick or dying prey but will take food from other birds if they can.

Breeding/Young

Pairs mate, nest and raise young. Breeding occurs in winter and young fledge in spring. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the young. In North Carolina adult pairs may migrate together in the summer, or stay near the nesting territory year round. Eagles produce one to three eggs, and if food is plentiful, all may survive to fledge. In North Carolina, nesting begins in January. Eggs hatch after 30 to 40 days incubation. Parents take turns brooding, guarding and feeding young. Nestlings fledge in about 11 weeks.

Life Expectancy

Up to 20 years



Bald eagle chicks (Photo: USFWS)



Juvenile bald eagle (Photo: Melissa McGaw/NCWRC)