

Bald Eagle

Native Range Map



Kingdom: Animalia
Phylum: Chordata
Subphylum: Vertebrata
Class: Aves
Order: Falconiformes
Family: Accipitridae
Genus: *Haliaeetus*
Species: *leucocephalus*



Habitat

- **In the Wild:** The bald eagle is found near water from Alaska throughout Canada and scattered localities in nearly all of the United States. There is also a small number in Mexico. They build huge nests in the tops of large trees near rivers, lakes and marshes. These nests are usually re-used and enlarged each year.
- **Exhibit Location:** Propagation Unit

Characteristics

- Length: 28-38 inches; Wingspan: females up to 8 ft. and males up to 7 ft.; Weight: females up to 14 lbs. and males up to 10 lbs.
- The plumage of an adult bald eagle is brown with a white head and tail. Their legs are feathered half way down the tarsus (lower leg) and the beak, feet, and eyes are bright yellow. They have massive tarsi, short and powerful grasping toes, and long talons. The talon of the hind toe is highly developed and is used to pierce vital areas while the prey is held immobile by the front toes.
- Immature bald eagles have a dark brown tail, head and body. Their plumage is blotched with cream or white. The beak is brownish; eyes are pale yellow, and feet lemon yellow. The head becomes white when the bird is 4 to 5 years old.
- **Lifespan: In the Wild** about 30 years; **In Captivity** about 36 years

Behaviors

- The bald eagle is a skilled, agile hunter and an agile maneuverer. They will find prey by perching or while in the air. They scavenge, stealing fish from osprey in mid-air. They search for fish by flying over water, diving down and snatching the fish with strong sharp talons. The fish is carried perpendicular to the bird's body versus the osprey that carries fish parallel to its body creating a more streamlined effect helpful in flying.
- Eagles also chase injured or shot and crippled waterfowl. In flight, they glide or soar keeping their broad wings flat and not up-tilted as vultures do.
- They have a wide variety of aerial displays which include pursuit flights and high-soaring. They can attain flight speeds of 36 to 44 mph while gliding and flapping.
- Their call is high-pitched whistling or piping.
- **Enrichments at the Zoo:** whole prey items, natural perches

Reproduction

- Sexual maturity is attained at 5 years of age.
- Bald eagles are monogamous and thought to mate for life. They only select another mate if their mate should die.
- Courtship display includes cartwheel action where 2 high-flying birds alternate swooping very close together and then regaining altitude rapidly. As the male dives, the female turns upside down and the 2 birds interlock their extended talons. With wings spread, the pair fall earthward rotating and then separating before getting too close to the ground.
- Females lay a clutch of 1 to 3 eggs, usually 2. Incubation lasts from 5 to 6 weeks. A female lays her eggs a few days apart and incubation begins with the first egg. One or two days is the normal age difference between eaglets. Older hatchlings are able to dominate the younger ones for food because of their size.

In a 3-egg brood, the third chick has little chance of survival. The young first fly at 72 to 75 days after hatching.

- Nest duties between the adult pair are shared equally.

Diet

- **In the Wild:** fish (primary source), muskrats, squirrels, rabbits, road kills and other carrion
- **At the Zoo:** rats, quail, fish and rabbits

Conservation Status

- **IUCN status:** Threatened; **CITES:** Appendix I
- The bald eagle was listed as endangered in 1967 and threatened in 1995. Delisting was proposed in 1999. Hunting and pollution were the two main reasons for their being on the endangered list. In particular, the use of pesticides such as DDT had been the greatest threat to the species. Pesticides are often found in fish, the major source of their food supply. DDT in a female's body disturbed the shell-making process, causing her to produce very weak shells or no shells at all. By the time the U.S. restricted the use of DDT in 1972, only 800 breeding pairs remained.
- Under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the eagles have made a steady recovery. Breeding pairs now number close to 3000. Some states now support effective nest-monitoring and programs to release young birds into the wild. Federal protection has involved monitoring populations, improving protection, setting up captive breeding programs, relocating wild birds and establishing a wide-ranging public information program.

Did You Know?/Fun Facts

- A bald eagle's nest can reach 20 feet across and weigh up to 4,000 lbs.
- The bald eagle was adopted as the national emblem in 1782. Benjamin Franklin wanted the turkey to be the national bird because he said the bald eagle was a bird of bad moral character.
- The bald eagle isn't really bald. The use of "bald" in its name is actually a shortening of the word "piebald," which describes something that is spotted or patchy, especially in black and white. Because the bald eagle has a dark brown body and a white head and tail, piebald is an apt description.
- Bald eagles can swim. They use their wings to propel themselves through the water. Since their diet is primarily fish, this skill comes in quite handy.

Source:

- American bald eagle. (n.d.). Retrieved May. 31, 2005, from National Wild Life Federation Web site: <http://www.nwf.org/wildlife/baldeagle/>.
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- News release: the bald eagle is back. (n.d.). Retrieved May. 30, 2005, from U. S. Fish & Wildlife Service Conserving the Nature of America Web site: <http://www.fws.gov/r9extaff/eaglejuly2.html>