

The Return of the Bald Eagle

(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

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This brochure was compiled by the
Delaware River Basin Commission
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It is estimated that during the 1700s the national bald eagle population was about 100,000. The first major decline in population occurred during the late 1800s when large numbers of the birds were killed indiscriminately prior to federal protection under the Bald Eagle Act of 1940.

The heavy use of DDT and other pesticides, which became widespread by the 1940s, also had a significant effect on the bald eagle population because these chemicals inhibited successful reproduction by making the shells of the eagle eggs too thin to hatch.

By the 1960s a single bald eagle sighting along the Delaware River was rare; this is particularly noteworthy since hundreds of bald eagles previously wintered along the river.

The Good News!

Today, the number of bald eagles found nationally and in the Delaware River Basin has rebounded dramatically. One very important reason for the return of the eagle was the federal government's decision in 1972 to ban the manufacturing of DDT in the United States. Programs by the Delaware River Basin Commission and other agencies and organizations to keep the river and its tributaries clean, the fish abundant, and the habitat undisturbed also have been a big help in the recovery of the bald eagle population throughout the basin.

The 120-mile stretch of the Delaware River from Hancock, N.Y. to the Delaware Water Gap is one of the largest and most important inland bald eagle wintering habitats in the Northeastern United States. This is based upon consistency of annual use and the numbers of eagles confirmed to be using the upper Delaware. This region provides areas of open water for foraging and prey (such as fish, waterfowl, and carrion), as well as adequate undisturbed upland areas for perching and roosting, which are all requisites for suitable overwintering habitat. The Delaware River is considered an "essential" bald eagle winter habitat, as specified by the Northern States Bald Eagle

Recovery Plan. Preservation of "essential habitat" is considered necessary for the full recovery and long-term survival of this species.

Current Trends

In New York State, only one pair of bald eagles nested in 1976; this number has dramatically increased to close to 500 nests in 2019 thanks to conservation efforts. The Upper Delaware River Watershed provides prime eagle viewing in the winter, and it has become a popular off-season activity. The New York State Dept. of Environmental Conservation works cooperatively with the Delaware Highlands Conservancy and the National Park Service Upper Delaware Scenic and Recreational River to help visitors find and properly observe wintering eagles.

The Pennsylvania Game Commission reports over 300 nesting bald eagles were documented in Pennsylvania in 2019, with eagles nesting in all of the state's 67 counties. As a comparison, there were only three known nesting pairs in 1980. The Poconos and upper Delaware River region are home to one of the three largest concentrations of eagle nests in the state. Bald eagles have even nested successfully in Philadelphia and other areas along the tidal Delaware River (south of Trenton, N.J.).

According to the New Jersey Division of Fish and Wildlife, in 2022, there were more than 250 nesting pairs of eagles that produced 335 young. The numbers of wintering eagles also rose significantly. Most nests are located in the southern part of the state, particularly within about 12.5 miles of the Delaware River and Bay. To compare, fewer than 10 bald eagles were observed in the state in





Two eaglets perch on a nest along the upper Delaware River in New York State. Their white head feathers will not appear until they reach maturity. Photo by Peter Nye, NYSDEC.

1978.

During the 2018 nesting season, Delaware Division of Fish and Wildlife biologists documented 132 nests with 77 active breeding pairs. During the 1980s, there were as few as two to four nesting pairs in the entire state.

Hopefully, ongoing bald eagle restoration programs will result in even greater numbers of this living symbol of America's freedom and spirit returning to a river which witnessed a nation's birth.

For more Bald Eagle information, please visit <https://www.nj.gov/drbc/basin/living/bald-eagle.html>



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Did you know?

Despite objections from Benjamin Franklin, the bald eagle was selected as the national emblem on June 20, 1782, because of its long life, great strength, and majestic looks. Franklin had opted for the turkey, noting it was a bird of courage which would not hesitate to attack a grenadier of the British Guards.

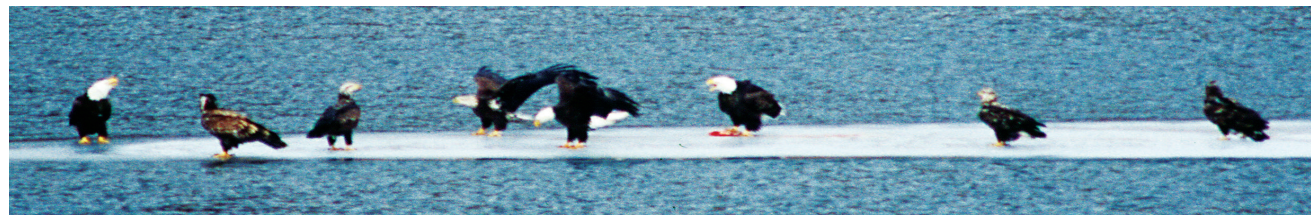
Are bald eagles bald? No, their heads are covered with feathers which turn white as the birds mature. The word "bald" is a derivative of "balde," an old English word meaning white.

Bald eagles are predominantly fish eaters, which is why they build their nests and live near water, and why they migrate to open water areas during the winter months.

Eagles and other birds have three eyelids. There are two outside eyelids; the bottom is bigger than the top, so they blink up instead of down. The inner eyelid is called a nictitating membrane. This eyelid grows in the inner corner of the eye, right next to the tear duct, is transparent, and sweeps across the eye from side to side.

Bald eagles hold the record for the biggest bird nest ever built. One nest in Florida was over 20 feet deep, over nine feet wide, and weighed almost three tons.

Eagles have special feet with talons, not claws. Why? Talons are designed to carry things. An eagle foot has four muscular toes, powerful enough to hang onto a large fish as it carries it through the air.



(Top L) A juvenile bald eagle. Photo by Martha Tully. (Top R) Two adult bald eagles. Photo by David B. Soete. (Bottom) A young bald eagle, after snaring a fish in the Delaware River at Narrowsburg, N.Y., lands on an ice floe. Within minutes, other eagles appear, intent on sharing the kill. Photo by David B. Soete.