

WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

ENDANGERED AND THREATENED SPECIES SERIES

BALD EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

ENDANGERED



Habitat: Natural year-round habitat almost exclusively lakes, rivers or seacoasts.

Weight: Males, 8-9 pounds; females, 10-14 pounds.

Length: 34-43 inches.

Wingspan: 6-7.5 feet.

Life Expectancy: 25-30 years of age.

Food: Fish; also anything that can be caught easily or scavenged such as waterfowl, small and large mammals, and livestock carrion.

Status: Federally threatened; state endangered.

Identification: Adult bald eagles have a snow-white head and tail, and a brownish-black body. The bill, eyes and feet are yellow. Immature eagles are uniformly grayish-brown. The distinctive adult plumage is attained at 4 to 5 years of age. The sexes are similar, although the females are larger. Young bald eagles are often confused with golden eagles; however, they are grayer than the darker golden eagle, and the bill is much heavier.

Range: The bald eagle nests from Alaska and Newfoundland south to Baja California, the Gulf Coast and Florida. It has recently returned to New England to nest. The greatest concentrations of wintering bald eagles are found from November to March in the western and Midwestern United States. Small concentrations of wintering eagles are also found in New England during this same time period.

Reproduction: Bald eagles breed in northern New England and Canada between March and April. They

use the same breeding area, and often the same nest, each year. They reach sexual maturity at 4 to 6 years of age. The nest, which sometimes measures 7 to 8 feet across, is a flat-topped mass of sticks, with a lining of fine vegetation such as rushes, mosses, or grasses. It is built in trees, 10 to 150 feet above ground. There are usually 1 to 3 (average 2) dull, white eggs in a clutch. Both the male and female incubate the eggs and feed the young. The time period between egg laying and fledging is approximately 4 months. The entire breeding cycle, from nest construction to fledging of young, lasts 6 months.

Reason for Decline: Bald eagle populations declined because of human disturbance at nest sites; the loss of waterside habitat due to human occupation; the loss of nesting trees; intentional shooting by poachers; illegal trapping, mostly in the western United States; and contamination of food sources, especially by pesticides such as DDT, with subsequent ill effects on health and reproduction.

History in Connecticut: Up to 100 eagles winter in Connecticut from December to early March along major rivers and at large reservoirs. This number is slowly increasing, but there is still a challenge to reconcile human population growth and urban/suburban sprawl with the specific needs of this endangered species. Bald eagles are infrequently observed during the summer. For the first time since the 1950s, a pair of bald eagles nested in Barkhamsted, Connecticut, in the summer of 1992 and produced 2 healthy chicks. The nest site in Barkhamsted continues to be used by a pair of bald eagles; chicks have also been produced at a new nest site along the upper Connecticut River, starting in 1997.

Interesting Facts: The bald eagle was first declared an endangered species with the passage of the federal Endangered Species Act in 1973. However, due to the banning of DDT, success of reintroduction programs through fostering of nestlings and hacking of fledglings, habitat and nest protection measures and other efforts to restore bald eagle populations, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) reclassified the bald eagle from endangered to threatened in the lower 48 states in 1996. While this reclassification does not alter conservation measures already in force to protect the bald eagle and its habitats, it is a step closer to the main goal of the Endangered Species Act, which is to restore endangered and threatened plants and animals to the point where they are viable, self-sustaining members of their ecosystems. Despite the reclassification of the bald eagle's status by the USFWS, the species remains endangered in Connecticut.

The bald eagle's range is restricted to North America. It was officially adopted as the national emblem of the United States of America on June 20, 1782.

Eagles are unable to carry much more than 4 pounds in flight. They kill prey by grasping it with their strong feet

and sharp talons. An eagle's beak is used solely for tearing flesh. The flight speed of a bald eagle ranges between 36 and 44 miles per hour.

Despite their large size, eagles are disturbed by unpredictable human activity, making delineated protection zones necessary around areas of high eagle use. Since winter is a stressful time for eagles, it is important that preferred winter feeding areas be protected. If these birds are frequently disturbed from feeding and forced to travel to a different area for food, their lives may be threatened. Adult birds are disturbed more easily than juveniles.

At night, wintering eagles often congregate at communal roost trees; in some cases, they travel 12 or more miles from a feeding area to a roost site. Roosts are often used for several years. Many roosts are protected from the wind by vegetation or terrain, providing a favorable thermal environment. Use of these protected sites helps minimize energy stress. In addition, communal roosting may aid the birds in their search for food.

Protective Legislation: *Federal* - Endangered Species Act of 1973, Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940, Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. *State* - Connecticut General Statutes Sec. 26-93 and Sec. 26-311.

What You Can Do: Winter is a difficult time for any wildlife species, including bald eagles. Food is harder to find and cold temperatures cause energy stress. If you see a congregation of eagles feeding or roosting, leave them alone and observe them from a distance. It is also important to stay away from nesting areas to avoid disturbing the birds. The Wildlife Division participates in a mid-winter eagle survey for the United States Geological Survey; volunteers are always welcome to help in this effort.

CONNECTICUT RANGE

