



Photo courtesy of Gene McKinnon

About this Handout

This educational handout was developed by FOLFAN (Friends of Lakes Folsom and Natoma) with the assistance of Joleen Maiden and Kathy Kayner.

FOLFAN is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization and a State Park Cooperating Association for the Folsom Lake State Recreation Area.

FOLFAN's mission is to enhance education and recreation opportunities for the public and to protect the wonders and resources of Lakes Folsom and Natoma.

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Photo courtesy of Greg Jung

Bald Eagles: Common Questions

What species are they? Raptor, Bird of Prey?

There are 60 species of Eagles worldwide. Except for Alaska, the two that we see in North America are Bald Eagles and Golden Eagles. Eagles are part of a group of predatory birds called Raptors, or Birds of Prey. This group also includes Kites, Hawks, Falcons, Buzzards, Vultures and Owls.

How do Bald Eagles compare to Golden Eagles?

As adults, both are large birds with dark brown bodies. Most people believe they are closely related, but they are not. Bald Eagles belong to a group called "Sea Eagles," and are more closely related to Kites. Golden Eagles are more closely related to Hawks. Bald Eagles tend to be slightly larger than Golden Eagles.

Why do they call them "Bald" Eagles?

Perhaps surprisingly, it's not because they were thought to have bald heads! The name comes from the Old English word "balde," which means white and refers to their white feathers.

How long do they live?

The average is 25-28 years for those who live in the wild. Those who live in captivity may live twice that long.

Do they keep the same mate?

Bald Eagles mate for life. But if they lose a mate, they will usually find a new mate.

How many eggs do they lay and when?

Two eggs is the norm (per season), but three eggs is not uncommon. Nesting season varies by region.

Do they reuse the same nest every year?

Yes, unless something drives them away from that nest. For example, if the tree or nest has fallen, or if people don't give them enough space. They usually nest near the water, often perched in one of the taller trees.

How can you tell the difference between a female and a male?

As with all birds of prey, the females are larger. The size difference reflects their respective duties; the males' smaller, sleeker body enables them to be slightly better hunters, while the females' larger size allows her to sit for longer periods on the nest and to be a deterrent for predators approaching the nest.

How can you tell the difference between a juvenile and an adult?

A Bald Eagle attains their adult plumage with the complete white head and tail at 4-5 years of age.

When do young eagles fly?

After hatching, the chicks sit in the nest for 10-13 weeks until they "fledge" (begin to learn to fly). Fledglings continue to rely on their parents for food and other care for 4-6 weeks post fledging.

Do the young ever return to the nest?

Many juveniles who have left the nest do return to the area of their birth, but aren't allowed in the nest.

A pair of wild Bald Eagles living in our region successfully raised two juveniles in 2017 and are currently raising two new eaglets in 2018.

The eaglets are fed primarily fish for the first month of their lives and as the weather warms, snakes, reptiles, birds and mammals will be on the menu.

By their second month, they will be wingsizing (flapping their wings) and branching in preparation for that all important first flight (or fledge) which will take place by the time they are three months old. After they fledge, they will return to the nest for a few weeks to follow their parents to other areas to learn how to hunt for themselves. This early life stage development helps to ensure their continued success; it is important to give them plenty of space as they are still new to taking off from a perched position.



Photo courtesy of Kathy Kayner



Picture courtesy of Susan Maxwell Skinner

Where do they live?

Bald Eagles live in virtually any kind of North American wetland habitat including seacoasts, rivers, large lakes or marshes, and other large bodies of open water with an abundance of fish. They like to have a 4-5 mile area for hunting and rearing their young, but will tolerate a smaller area if food is abundant.

What do they eat?

Fish is their preferred diet. But they also eat waterfowl and small mammals like squirrels, raccoons and rabbits. They are also opportunistic predators, meaning that in addition to hunting for live prey, they will steal food from other animals, such as Osprey, or they will scavenge on carrion.

How well do they see?

The “eagle eye” is among the strongest in the animal kingdom, with a visual resolution five times stronger than an average human.

How fast do they fly?

Their average flight speed is about 40 mph. However, they can fly up to 100 mph while diving.

What is their conservation status?

Forty years ago, Bald Eagles were in danger of extinction. Habitat destruction, illegal shooting, and the contamination of its food source, largely as a consequence of DDT, decimated the eagle population. Habitat protection through the Endangered Species Act, the banning of DDT, and conservation actions have helped Bald Eagles make a remarkable recovery.

How do you view them responsibly?

When watching wildlife, including Eagles, one of the greatest challenges is how to get close enough to an animal to have a good view of it without disturbing it. It should be the goal of every wildlife watcher to never approach any wildlife so closely that it reacts to your presence. While it may not seem like a big deal that an animal has noticed your presence and makes an effort to flee, there are potential negative consequences including nest failure. Remember, most wildlife are surviving meal to meal. Causing them to expend energy running or flying away from you may be the energy it needed to hunt and feed itself, or to feed its young.