



## Bald Eagles: Common Questions

### What species are they?

There are 60 species of eagles worldwide. The two that we see in North America are Bald Eagles and Golden Eagles. They 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?

It’s not because they were once thought to have bald heads! The name comes from the Old English word “balde,” which means white and refers to their white feathers.

### 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.

### 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 they may steal food from other animals or 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 the human eye.

### 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 one.

### When do juveniles begin to look like adults?

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

### 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 any predators approaching the nest.

### Do they reuse the same nest?

Yes, unless something drives them away from that nest. For example, if the tree or nest has fallen or been extensively damaged, or if people don’t give them enough space. They usually nest near the water, often perched in a tall tree.

### 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. In the Sierra foothills east of Sacramento, hatchlings typically emerge in March and leave the nest area in June.

### When do young Eagles fly?

By the end of their second month, they will be flapping their wings and “branching” (hopping from branch to branch within the nest tree) in preparation for their all important first flight from the nest (or “fledge”), which will take place by around the time they are three months old. After fledging, they return to the nest and spend a few more weeks with their parents, learning to hunt and be a successful Bald Eagle.



### 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.

## 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. However, that success is now threatened by the use of rodenticide (commonly known as rat poison). A recent study by the University of Georgia College of Veterinary Medicine found that over 80% of Bald Eagles had at least trace amounts of rodenticide in their bodies.

## DO NOT DISTURB THE EAGLES

The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (16 U.S.C. 668-668c) prohibits anyone from harming or disturbing eagles or their nest areas. Visitors/observers near an active eagle nest site (during breeding season) must:

- **Minimize noise**
- **Do not stand or sit near an active nest**
- **To stop and watch, be at least 330' from the nest or at a "designated viewing area"**

**To report criminal behavior toward wildlife to appropriate authorities, call:**

**U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service  
844-397-8477**

**California Dept of Fish and Wildlife  
888-334-2258**

With all wildlife viewing, one of the greatest challenges is how to get close enough to the wildlife to get a good view of it, or good photos, without disturbing it. The answer to that challenge is to use binoculars, a camera with a telephoto lens, or a spotting scope. One should never approach the wildlife so that it reacts to your presence by yelling at you or by making an effort to flee. Please give the wildlife the space they need to survive and thrive!



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## BALD EAGLES

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*Photo credits: Flying Eagle (above) by Kathy Kayner; Inside: Eagle on branch by Greg Jung; Two Eagles by Kathy Kayner; Flying Eagle by Greg Jung; Cover photo by Gene McKinnon.*

