



## HABITAT

Bald eagles require a good food base, perching areas and nesting sites. Traditionally, bald eagles are found nesting near rivers, lakes and marshes. Their habitat can include estuaries, large lakes, reservoirs, rivers, and some seacoasts.

Eagle pairs usually choose the tops of large trees to build nests. However, bald eagle nests have also been found on cliffs, the ground, and even on human-made structures like power poles and communication towers. When nesting in trees, they generally select the tallest trees with limbs strong enough to support their large, heavy nests. Nests are generally 4 to 5 feet wide and 2 to 4 feet deep. These nests can reach 10 feet across and can weigh thousands of pounds. Eagle nests are constructed with large sticks, and may be lined with moss, grass, plant stalks, lichens, seaweed or sod. Pairs will often use and enlarge the same nest year after year unless the tree or nest has fallen or been extensively damaged, or if some other activity drives them away such as human interference. Nest sites typically include at least one perch with a clear view of a body of water for foraging.

The eagles may travel great distances during various phases of their lives and non-breeding seasons, but usually return to nest and breed within 100 miles of the place where they were raised. While juveniles from previous years' hatches often return to their natal area, they are not allowed back into the nest from which they hatched.

## FOOD

Bald eagles are opportunistic feeders, with fish being a staple food. They will also feed on waterfowl, shorebirds, waterbirds, turtles, rabbits, snakes, small animals, and carrion. Because eagles are visual hunters, they typically locate prey from a conspicuous perch, or a soaring flight, and then swoop down and strike. They are known to scavenge on dead fish and animals, and are also notorious food thieves, stealing the caught prey from other eagles, mammals and other birds of prey.

The first eaglet is fed the first day after hatching and quickly develops a size advantage over the second eaglet, and third eaglet if there are more than two. During the first days after hatching, the female tears tiny pieces of food that the male brings to feed the eaglets. As the eaglets grow, both parents tear bigger pieces of food. After the third week, the parents begin to relax the brood's care, leaving the eaglets in the nest unattended for short periods of time. By the fourth week, both parents begin to forage for food and bring about the same amount of food to the nest. By the fifth and sixth weeks, the parents take longer periods of time away from the nest and begin to roost away from the nest. At about the seventh week, the eaglets begin to tear pieces of the prey the parents bring to the nest.

## LIFE CYCLE

Bald eagles can live up to about 30 years in the wild, and sometimes even longer in captivity.

Most bald eagles are capable of breeding at 4 or 5 years of age. Bald eagles mate for life, but if an individual in the pair dies, the survivor will accept a new mate.

Bald eagles typically lay two eggs each season, but three eggs are not uncommon. Eggs incubate for approximately 35 days, at which time the hatching baby eagles crack and pip the eggshell open independently, without any help from the parents. After hatching, both the female and male brood the eaglets (they are not left unattended in the first few weeks) with the female doing most of the brooding and the male bringing food for the female and the eaglets. On hot and sunny days, the female may use her wings to shade the eaglets from the sun. On cold days she may keep the eaglets warm by attempting brooding with the now larger eaglets.

By the end of their second month, eaglets will be flapping their wings and "branching" (hopping from branch to branch within the nest tree). This is done in preparation for their all-important first flight from the nest, or "fledge." The fledge will take place by around the time they are three months old. Fledging can be dramatic while the fledglings learn how to take off and land successfully.

After fledging, they return to the nest and spend a few more weeks with their parents, learning the life skills needed to survive on their own. Fledglings follow the parents everywhere, observing and learning how to hunt, bathe, carry and hold their food, perch with their food, and eat outside of the relatively flat floor of the nest.

Although eaglets can be very aggressive to each other, food availability appears to be the driving force in determining how aggressive eaglets are. When the parents bring plenty of food, broods of two or three eaglets do not show much aggression toward each other. When food is abundant, all three eaglets fledge the nest at similar sizes even after showing differences in size at earlier stages in the nest.

## PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Bald eagles are large, powerful birds. As with all birds of prey, the females are larger. Females may have a wingspan of up to 8 feet and can weigh as much as 14 pounds. Males may have a wingspan of up to 6 feet and can weigh as much as 10 pounds. 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. Bald eagles in the northern part of their range grow larger than those in the southern parts of their range. Bald eagles in Alaska have been known to reach 16 pounds.

A bald eagle's eyesight is among the strongest in the animal kingdom, with a visual resolution five times stronger than the human eye.

The well-known white head and white tail of bald eagles, with a brown body, is the plumage of a mature adult. Bald eagles generally attain adult plumage by 5 years of age. Until bald eagles reach 4 to 5 years of age, they have mottled brown and white feathers all over their bodies, and



slowly develop their distinctive white head and tail as they mature. Bald eagles also slowly develop their light eyes and bright yellow bills; juvenile eagles initially have dark eyes and bills, that lighten as they reach adulthood. Bald eagles have yellow legs and only the tops of their legs have feathers.

Interestingly, the name bald eagle comes from the Old English word "balde," which means white and refers to color of the feathers on the heads of adults.

The call of a bald eagle may not be what you might expect from such a large raptor. Bald eagle calls consist of seven or eight notes described as, "ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ki-ker." Often, when bald eagles are shown in movies or on television, the long, drawn-out call that is used is really that of a red-tailed hawk!

## SIMILAR SPECIES

If plumage is not clearly seen, Bald Eagles can be confused with golden eagles. Young Bald Eagles less than 5 years old, do not yet have a fully white head and white tail. They also are variably molted brown and white, so are juveniles easily confused with golden eagles. Although they look similar during some life stages, bald and golden eagles are not closely related. Bald Eagles belong to a group called "sea eagles," and are more closely related to kites. Golden eagles are more closely related to hawks. When soaring, eagles can also be confused with turkey vultures and, if size is misjudged, with larger hawk species such as red-tailed hawks.



## 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 (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

Please remember that Bald Eagles are protected by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. These laws collectively prohibit anyone from harming or disturbing the eagles or their nests.

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



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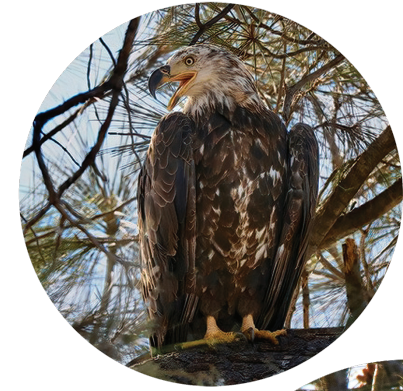


<https://folfan.org/baldeagleinterpprogram/>

*Credits: Flying eagle (above) by Kathy Kayner; Inside: Juvenile and parent by Kathy Kayner; Outside: Flying juvenile by Greg Jung; Cover photo by Kathy Kayner, Sub-adult by Kathy Kayner; Mama and papa by Gene McKinnon; Illustrations by Ella Clavel (EllaArt). Special thanks to Joleen Maiden, Kathy Kayner and Karen Shaffer for their expertise in helping develop this guide.*



## BALD EAGLES



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The bald eagle is truly an all-American bird and is the only eagle that is solely native to North America. Its historic range was from Alaska and Canada, across the contiguous United States and down to northern Mexico. 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. Bald eagles can be seen soaring high above, flying around bodies of water, perched in trees or on towers, and standing on rocks or on the ground. They are visual predators and hunt both while flying and from perches.