

Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocoephalus



Photo by John Boyd

Physical Description:

Our national symbol, the adult Bald Eagle is an unmistakable bird with a white head, white tail feathers and yellow feet. An adult female stands approximately 35-37 inches with a wingspan of 79-90 inches and a male eagle stands 30-34 inches with a 72-85 inch wingspan. Average weight varies from 10-14 pounds. A Bald Eagle's eyesight is three to four times that of a human with 20/20 vision. While facing forward, an eagle can see both straight ahead and to the sides. Bald Eagles have four toes with long talons, three point forward and the hind toe, pointing backward is the most powerful and is used for piercing prey and carrion. Since the talons cannot "lock", prey can be easily released.

Natural History:

The Bald Eagle was listed as an endangered species in 1963 when there were fewer than 450 pairs in the United States (before the eggshell thinning pesticide DDT was banned). As one of the greatest success stories of the Endangered Species Act, the Bald Eagle was de-listed in 2007 when the numbers of birds approached 10,000 pairs.

Reproduction:

At approximately five years of age, a Bald Eagle will mate for life unless they are unable to produce a chick. A nest will be constructed usually within 300 yards of a water source and often in the tallest and largest diameter tree. A pair will continue to add up to several pounds of nesting material every year. The average life expectancy of a nest is 20 years. The female will usually lay two eggs two days apart. Occasionally three eggs are laid but rarely is there only one.

Life Cycle:

Average incubation of eggs is 35 days with both parents attending although the female will primarily stay in the nest. The first flight from the nest occurs 8-14 weeks after hatching. Within a month of fledging, the new juvenile will have mastered the art of soaring and within 17-23 weeks the bird will leave the nesting area and break family ties. Juvenile eagles may have a mortality rate as high as 50%. Bald Eagles live approximately 15-20 years in the wild but may live as long as 45 years in captivity.

Range:

Bald Eagles range in Canada and all U.S. states except Hawaii. There are approximately 90-120 nesting pairs in the San Juan Islands, which is probably the carrying capacity for this area. Bald eagles are abundant throughout the year except late summer and fall. During this time, most eagles are taking advantage of the salmon spawning runs along the coastal rivers of Washington.

Diet:

A Bald Eagle is an opportunistic and diurnal (active during the day) feeder which consumes 5.5-12% of its body weight daily. In the order of preference, it acquires food by: 1) stealing prey from others, 2) scavenging and 3) hunting and killing. Eagles need not feed everyday. When food is abundant, they will gorge themselves and store food in their crop, which is a pouch in their gullet about halfway between their mouth and stomach. The food in the crop will then pass slowly into the eagle's stomach as it rests or sleeps. Indigestible portions of food such as feathers, fur and bone, are regurgitated in the form of pellets called "casts" usually in the morning after a meal.

Threats:

In the San Juan Islands, the Bald Eagle is the top predator. Gulls, ravens and crows can often be seen harassing eagles, but the bald eagle appears to ignore these nuisances. Peregrine falcons and ospreys are limited in this area because Bald Eagles will harass them and steal their food.

Fun Facts:

- Eagles can open and close their talons at will so prey cannot be "locked" in the talons.
- Bald eagles have 7000 feathers.
- Several eagles soaring together in a thermal is called a "kettle of eagles."
- Two of the largest nests on record are a nest in Ohio that blew down in 1925 after 36 years of use and weighed two tons, was 10 feet high and 8 feet across and another nest in Florida that measured 20 feet high and 10 feet across.

Sources:

- Phil Green, The Nature Conservancy, Yellow Island Caretaker
- *Bald Eagles Rebound*, The Journal, San Juan Island, June 28, 2007
- "Eagles, The World of Animals" by Leslie Brown
- "The Bald Eagle" by Mark Stalmaster
- "The Bald Eagle" on the Seattle Audubon website
- <http://www.birdweb.org/birdweb/bird_details.aspx?value=search&id=98>