

GOLDEN EAGLE

Much rarer in the east, the golden eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*) has been called the “king of birds.” It is heavier on average than the bald eagle and breeds at higher latitudes throughout the Northern Hemisphere. In North America, golden eagles nest in Canada, Alaska and western continental states. The United States population was estimated to be 40,000 in 2016. Shooting, trapping and possible pesticide contamination reduced their numbers in the 20th century, and they gained legal protection only in 1962 under the retitled Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. They are no longer known to nest anywhere in the eastern United States, despite unsuccessful attempts at introduction. Eastern populations are thought to have rebounded somewhat from historical declines; the Eastern Golden Eagle Working Group was formed in 2010 to promote understanding and conservation of the poorly understood population.

There is no sound evidence that eastern golden eagles ever nested south of New York. To this day, wandering individuals are occasionally seen during summer in West Virginia. During the winter, eastern golden eagles are found in greatest numbers in the central Appalachian Mountains of Pennsylvania, Virginia and West Virginia. In the Mountain State they are seen primarily in the mountains from Tucker County south to Monroe County.



Right, adult golden eagle

Below, immature golden eagle



Immature golden eagle

Life History

Golden eagles weigh from 6 to 14 pounds with a wingspan of 6 to 7.25 feet. Seldom heard, they occasionally utter a yelping bark. They prey on a wide variety of mammals as well as birds.

Golden eagles nest from late January to July in the west and from March to early September in the Arctic. In the west, some pairs only nest every other year, and a nest site is often used by many generations of golden eagles. The eastern population primarily nests on cliffs, although in some locations they nest in trees near open country.

The female incubates generally one or two eggs for 41 to 45 days. From 45 to 81 days after hatching, the eaglets leave the nest.

Identification

Adult: There is a golden wash to the feather tips of the head and neck and slight marbling at the base of the tail. The cere (the swollen area about the nostrils above the beak) and feet are yellow. Look for legs feathered to the toes and, while in flight, soaring with wings flat with only occasional wing beats.

Immature: The tail is mostly white with a black or brown band at the end. The primary (outer wing) feathers are white at the base. On the underside there is white showing at the “wrists” of the wings.

Remember

Threats to both species in West Virginia include poisoning from ingestion of lead shot, collisions with vehicles and structures, and illegal shooting and trapping. Bald and golden eagles are protected by both state and federal laws. It is against the law to “harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture or collect” these birds. Human presence at the nest site during the nesting season is also considered a form of harassment. In West Virginia a first offense is a misdemeanor, subject to fines of \$500 to \$5,000 or imprisonment for 60 days to a year. Second and subsequent convictions are felonies carrying fines of \$5,000 to \$10,000 and imprisonment for up to two years. Half of any imposed fines goes to those who provide information leading to an arrest. Violators also forfeit the right to a hunting license for 10 years. Federal fines and imprisonment are more stringent. Report information to your local natural resources police officer or the Wildlife Diversity Unit at (304) 637-0245. All communications are kept confidential. If you see a bald eagle nest in West Virginia, please report your sighting to dnr.wildlife@wv.gov.



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Cover: bald eagle

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EAGLES

of West Virginia



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BALD EAGLE

Adopted as our national symbol in 1782, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) has become a symbol of conservation success. While populations have remained relatively healthy in Alaska, the species has rebounded from the verge of extinction in the lower 48 states, thanks to legal and conservation efforts that began during the 20th century.

The number of these powerful birds of prey began declining in the 1800s, primarily due to loss of suitable habitat and overhunting of eagles’ prey. Shooting and other direct persecution further reduced eagle populations. By the 1930s, alarming population declines were observed throughout the lower 48 states. To stem the losses, bald eagles were given legal protection in 1940 under the federal Bald Eagle Protection Act.

Despite legal protection, eagles began to be harmed by the widespread use of the pesticide DDT beginning in the late 1940s. DDT caused thinning of eggshells, leading to breakage during incubation.

In 1972, DDT was banned in the United States, and in 1973 bald eagles became one of the first species protected under the Endangered Species Act. Due to the success of conservation actions, the species was reclassified as threatened in 1995, and delisted entirely from the act in 2007.

Large predatory birds have never been numerous. In 1782 there may have been 100,000 bald eagles in what are now the lower 48 states. By 1963, however, only 487 nesting pairs could be located. Population recovery since then has been dramatic. In 2020, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that there were 316,700 bald eagles in the lower 48 states.

Bald eagles were once rare in West Virginia in all seasons, but they are now seen regularly along most of the state’s major rivers. Nonbreeding eagles have been seen in most areas of the state. During fall migration, most observations come from the mountains where birds follow the ridges southward and frequently congregate at lakes.

In the spring of 1981, the first bald eagle nest in West Virginia was recorded along the South Branch of the Potomac River. Each year the pair raised their young until sometime late in 1985, when the large nest was blown down in a storm. The pair then built a new nest not far away, and the site was still in use in 2022.



Adult bald eagle

W. Lloyd Mackenzie

BALD EAGLES WERE ONCE RARE IN WEST VIRGINIA IN ALL SEASONS, BUT THEY ARE NOW SEEN REGULARLY ALONG MOST OF THE STATE’S MAJOR RIVERS.

In 2005, 19 pairs attempted to nest in West Virginia, and 14 of these nests were successful in fledging young eagles. In 2014, 40 active nest sites were observed during the state’s second breeding bird atlas project; a total of 53 nest sites were found during the atlas period from 2009 to 2014. Division of Natural Resources biologists monitor the state’s bald eagle nests every year and continue to search for new nests. As of 2022, more than 130 nests have been documented in the state.



Adult bald eagle

Steve Berardi

Life History

Adult bald eagles average 34 inches in length and have a wingspan of 6 to 7.5 feet. Their seldom-heard call is a high-pitched squeaky chatter. Bald eagles feed mainly on fish, but they will also eat birds, small mammals, reptiles and carrion (dead animals), including an occasional road-killed deer.

Bald eagles typically mate for life, although if one dies the survivor will accept another mate. Nesting usually begins in January or February in West Virginia. Nests are typically located in large trees near rivers or lakes and may be used for years, increasing in size as sticks are added. In 1984 the South Branch nest was 5.25 feet in diameter and 2.75 feet deep.

Both birds typically incubate two eggs (range of one to four), which hatch in about 35 days; both parents feed the nestlings. At around 8 to 14 weeks the eaglets leave the nest. They will not become sexually mature and attain the adult’s white head and tail feathers until 4 to 5 years of age. Bald eagles usually remain within 100 miles of where they were hatched to nest and raise young of their own.



Adult bald eagle with juveniles

Sharyn Ogden

Identification

Adult: The sexes are alike in appearance with yellow bills and feet, black talons, golden eyes, and white heads and tail feathers. The female is usually slightly larger than the male.

Immature: The tail, head and body feathers are speckled brown with some white in the wing linings. The talons and bill are yellow.