

THE BALD EAGLE – A TRUE AMERICAN BIRD

My oar slices through the calm water. We launched our canoe just moments ago, excited about our weekend camping trip and the possibility of bountiful wildlife sightings. I adjust the tip of my hat in the bright morning sun, scanning the tree line for our nation's bird. There it is, stoic and silent on a top branch of a tree – a magnificent bald eagle. As we paddle by, I stare in awe at its white head, dark body and impressive size. It will be several miles before we reach our island campsite in northern New Hampshire, and there are sure to be more eagles along the way.

Bald eagles are often observed in New Hampshire, now that their population has rebounded. You may know the story. Several factors contributed to their decline, including loss of habitat, increase in pesticide use, and decreased numbers of prey such as ducks. It wasn't until nationwide protection, and the ban of the pesticide DDT, that the bald eagle population finally turned around. Pesticides were bio-accumulating in the food chain: residual pesticides washed into our waterways, fish ate contaminated plants, and bald eagles ate contaminated fish. As a result, adult bald eagles were laying eggs with very thin shells that would crack easily and not hatch. At its lowest point, the bald eagle population across the country was estimated at only 487 nesting pairs. Much credit for the alarm is given to Rachel Carson's 1962 book *Silent Spring*, which linked detrimental environmental changes to high levels of pesticide use.

In New Hampshire, bald eagles began nesting again in 1988. Today, our bald eagle population is soaring, with 56 territorial pairs recorded in 2016. They are expected to be removed from New Hampshire's list of threatened species this year.

We paddle our canoe to shore under the shade of an overhanging tree and take a short break from the strong sun. As I pull out my water bottle, a shadow over the glistening water catches my eye. I look up just in time to see the large wings of a bald eagle in flight. Bald eagles have a wingspan of up to eight feet, and there is no mistaking them for



Bald eagles are a true American bird, found only in North America. The scientific name means sea (halo) eagle (aetos) with a white (leukos) head.

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another raptor. I watch to see if it has spotted prey – I want to see it catch a fish! Instead, it soars upward and gracefully lands on a high tree branch. Bald eagles have acute eyesight that is said to be four times that of humans. Equipped with great speed and strong talons, they can swoop down to grasp unsuspecting prey – in water or on land – with incredible accuracy. Bald eagles are also opportunistic feeders, stealing prey from other birds or mammals (including fish caught by anglers), and eating carrion.

We arrive at our campsite and happily stretch our legs as we explore every corner

of the remote island. We soon find that we have front row tickets to a bald eagle nest! I quickly run back to the boat for my binoculars, and we watch the young until the sun starts to set. Bald eagles mate for life and typically come back to the same nest year after year. They add sticks to their nest every year, which can lead to huge nests over five feet wide and weighing thousands of pounds. The sun starts to set, and darkness shakes us back to reality. We have campsite chores to do: a meal to cook, a tent to pitch, and so I turn away, promising to check in on my bald eagle friends in the morning light.



The nest of a bald eagle can be massive. Typically five feet in diameter and over four feet deep, the nest is constructed primarily of large twigs and small branches. Mating pairs will often use the same nest year after year.

Nature columnist Lindsay Webb is an avid outdoors-woman who enjoys sharing her adventures in the natural world with WJ readers.



BALD EAGLE

(Haliaeetus leucocephalus)

DESCRIPTION:

White head and tail, dark brown body and wings. Beak and legs are bright yellow. Immature bald eagles (up to age five) are mostly brown on their heads and tails, with mottled white and brown bodies.

RANGE:

During breeding season (summer), found throughout northern North America and along the eastern shore south to Florida. Most migrate south into central and southern U.S. during the winter months, although some may remain in northern states, where there is open water with available prey. Approximately 100 bald eagles winter in New Hampshire, according to the 2017 Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey conducted by NH Audubon.

HABITAT:

Bald eagles are found near lakes, reservoirs, rivers, marshes and along the coast. They nest in tall trees within forested areas near these large bodies of water. In the winter, bald eagles are often spotted in open, non-forested areas near ice-free water.

FOOD:

Waterfowl, fish, turtles, snakes, birds, small mammals and carrion.

REPRODUCTION:

At around four or five years, bald eagles choose mates in a dramatic aerial display. They mate for life and will only choose another mate if something happens to the other. Nesting begins in mid-February, with eggs laid in March-April. Chicks hatch about one month later and are flying in a few months.

ECOSYSTEM ROLE:

Because they are at the top of the food chain, bald eagles are considered a bellwether species. Their numbers help warn of damaging changes in habitat and water resources, as well as declines in prey species.



Bald eagles are skilled hunters, often seen swooping down to pull fish out of the water, but they are not shy about stealing prey – even from a younger, immature bald eagle.

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