



*Master of the sky, the Bald Eagle can soar through the air at over 65 miles per hour using incredible binocular vision eight times that of human vision.*



*A regal raptor indeed, this beautiful, powerful bird deserves to be a national symbol. The adult Bald Eagle sports a headress and tail of white feathers. They have a keen sense of hearing as well as sight.*





# The Bald Eagle

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What landed in the field? Kind of looks like a deer, but it came from the air as fast as lightning. We were standing in our kitchen looking out the windows and it was then that I saw a most overwhelming sight — a Bald Eagle taking flight with a squirming snake in tow. I assume that it was a rattlesnake since we have seen many rattlers around here. I stood there, mesmerized, with my mouth gaping open, praying that he would not drop the snake on our house. I should have known that dropping the snake was not an option for him, not with those powerful talons and the confident way he ascended skyward. He was hungry and that snake was his meal ticket!

## Description

The Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is a raptor or "Bird of Prey." They are natural predators and can weigh up to 15 pounds, with the female being the heavier member of the Eagle pair. Their visual acuity is eight times that of human vision and it has been described as three dimensional or binocular vision. They are capable of spotting a mouse in a field of tall grass from a mile away.

An adult Bald Eagle sports a headdress and tail of white feathers that are unmistakably their most outstanding feature. The massive wingspan extends over eight feet and from head to tail, the Bald Eagle measures three feet in length. Three toes on the Bald Eagle's foot face forward and one points toward the rear. They extend their two-inch talons to shred and slice meat. The sharp hooked beak is used to rip and tear the flesh of their prey and that of dead animals (carrion).

The regal Bald Eagle soars through the air at over 65 miles per hour and dives at astonishing speeds of 150-200 miles per hour with perfect precision as they swoop down to capture their prey. Gliding at an altitude of over 10,000 feet, attained by the use of warm air rising, natural currents, and thermal updrafts, the Bald Eagle dominates the sky.

Jennifer Moore who lives on the west coast of Florida writes, "Recently, there was a bald eagle flying over the lake outside my apartment. It dove, presumably to catch a fish, but the dive was unsuccessful. The eagle then soared in circles above the lake before gliding off into the distance. During the entire breathtaking scene, the eagle did not once flap its wings until it rose into the air again. Raptors rarely visit our lake but it was so beautiful watching that majestic bird."

Bald Eagles in the wild can live for 25 or more years and even longer in the protection of captivity. Bald Eagles prefer a diet of fish, but they also eat a variety of small ani-

mals such as rabbits, turtles, snakes, ducks, as well as carrion. They have extremely keen hearing, but their sense of smell is limited.

## Habitat

The natural habitat for Bald Eagles is the area around large bodies of open water such as dams, rivers, lakes, wetlands, and seacoasts. They build their nests where an abundance of food, such as salmon, is available. Bald Eagles return to their nest site, year after year. Their range encompasses the entire United States except for Hawaii. Some Bald Eagles migrate to the northern states during hot summer months.

One of the largest sightings of Bald Eagles occurs near Haines, Alaska each year. It is estimated that thousands of eagles are in attendance and is considered the largest gathering in the world. Another significant place to see Bald Eagles in numbers is Squaw Creek in the Northwestern rural area of Missouri. More than 250 Bald Eagles gather there in the fall and winter and have been reported to have started building nests at this site recently. Other gathering spots include Reelfoot Lake in Tennessee, Glacier National Park, Olympic National Park, in Washington state, and North Cascades National Park Complex along the Sagit River in Washington state.

In the Klamath Basin in Oregon, a convention is held in mid February where many people congregate to watch, admire, and learn about these magnificent birds.

## Stages of Life

I was reminded of the brave or rather crazy souls who jump out of planes, lock hands and arms, cart wheel and spiral downward together and then let go to parachute to the ground. This is the dance of mating Bald Eagles. They chase each other, sometimes lock their talons together in a frenzied display of courtship and love and cartwheel towards the ground, letting go just before reaching the ground and then soaring upward as fast as they can, only to repeat it once they gain enough altitude.

Bald Eagles choose a mate, usually at the age of five years or older and they remain together for life. They only select another mate if one of the pair dies. Bald Eagle pairs build the most astounding nests (aeries). Together they create a massive aerie that can weigh up to two tons and is six to eight feet wide and 10 feet thick. Largest of all bird nests, they are usually built 90 to 100 feet from the ground at the highest point possible on cliffs, rock ledges, or in large trees. Each year they return to this aerie to expand and

repair the nest that they have so diligently worked on year after year, for the purpose of rearing their offspring.

They build the aerie of sticks and branches and line them with various soft grasses and moss. Usually two eggs are laid, but most of the time only one chick is raised. Incubation time is approximately 35 days and both parents are known to incubate and feed the Eaglets. They hatch with light gray fluffy down and then turn brown before the age of 12 weeks.

Each Eaglet will require two or three fish per day. At 10 to 12 weeks of age, they fledge from the nest. Immature Bald Eagles have variable feathering and look different from an adult. With a mixed color of brown they do not reach maturity or achieve their beautiful white head and tail or yellow eyes and beak until the age of four or five years.

### **Endangered to Threatened**

In the United States, Congress created the Endangered Species Preservation Act (ESA) in 1973, the Bald Eagle was listed as an endangered species. This was due largely to the use of the pesticide, DDT. Toxic Chemicals which contaminated water and food supplies caused extremely thin eggshells that would get crushed in the nest or fail to hatch.

In 1994 the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service proposed to downgrade the classification of species from endangered to threatened due to an increase in numbers. There is considerably less risk to the species today since the toxic chemical DDT has been banned and regulated in the United States. It is estimated that there are now over 5,000 nesting pairs and a total of 20,000 Bald Eagles in the lower 48 states. They continue to be listed as threatened because of the ongoing problems of harassment by humans, traps, contaminants, and destruction of their homes because of development projects.

### **Conclusion**

The Native Americans considered the Bald Eagle a sacred bird, a guardian of their people, and the most powerful of all creatures of the sky. The likeness of the Bald Eagle is found on coins, dollars, flags, and posters. This majestic bird is the national symbol of the U.S.A. and it represents strength and freedom. ♦

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