

# Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

## ROARING FORK VALLEY BALD EAGLES

For years, bald eagles have been part of the landscape that is now America, and for over 200 years they have been integrally linked to the image of our nation. In 1782, the second Continental Congress adopted the bald eagle as our nation's symbol, based on its strength and demeanor. The bald eagle gained this title over another bird species, the turkey. Bald eagles are only found in North America and are frequently seen throughout the Roaring Fork Valley.

Bald eagles return to the Roaring Fork Valley around the middle of November and will stay along the rivers in the Valley until late February or early March. Eagles can be seen perched on abandoned great blue heron nests or in dead tree limbs along the rivers. Sometimes they may be spotted soaring over the Fryingpan, Crystal, and Roaring Fork Rivers in search of fish. The birds mainly winter in the Roaring Fork Valley, fishing its open waters. One nest near the Roaring Fork River has had a successful breeding pair since 2004.

In 1974, the Colorado Division of Wildlife started a bald eagle monitoring program in Colorado. That year, just one pair of nesting birds was found in the state. In 1999, there were 28 pairs of nesting birds and in 2000 the number jumped to 41. In 2001, there were about 51 nesting pairs of bald eagles in Colorado and 33 eaglets successfully fledged, or left the nest, that year. Today, however, the bald eagle is listed as threatened in the state.

## NATURAL HISTORY

The bald eagle gets its name for its distinctive white head, derived when the word "bald" had a connotation of white hair. This white head and the

eagle's white tail feathers do not appear until the eagle is in its fourth or fifth year. While the bird is in its first three years, the extensive white undersides of the birds' wings are telling that the juvenile is a bald eagle, not a golden eagle.

Bald eagles stand up to 31 inches high and have a wingspan of about 80 inches. The birds weigh up to 9.5 pounds, with males

generally heavier than females. Bald eagles can fly up to 30 miles per hour and dive at speeds up to 100 miles per hour. Bald eagles are usually seen along rivers or bodies of water as they prey mostly on fish. They are also known to eat carrion (dead animals), waterfowl, and small mammals, especially rabbits. When an eagle dives for a fish, it will catch the fish in its talons, not its beak as is commonly misunderstood. Bald eagles are able to carry up to half of their body weight, and the birds may

swim with larger fish, using its wings their paddles.

Adult bald eagles make a rather weak, flat, chirping whistle: kleeek-kik-ik-ik-ik or a lower kak-kak-kak. Immature birds' calls are generally harsher and more shrill than the adults' call.

## BREEDING

While bald eagles can be seen in the Roaring Fork Valley during the winter, they travel north in the summer to breed. The largest breeding population of bald eagles is found in Alaska. However, the birds breed in areas from Alaska to Newfoundland and south to California and Florida. Throughout these regions, bald eagles will breed along rivers, reservoirs, or lakes.

Bald eagles will nest in coniferous trees and sometimes on cliffs. Both females and males will help in



the construction of a platform nest, using twigs and branches as nest materials. Bald eagles have monogamous relationships; one male will stay with the same female all of his life. The birds can live for up to 40 years. Courting takes place in the air, and diving and chasing is common and thought to strengthen the bond between the pair. Often times the male and female will lock talons and somersault through the air.

A nesting pair of eagles will lay one to three, unmarked eggs in a nest, and both males and females will tend to the eggs. Most eagles will return to the same nest year after year, and continue to add material to the nest each year. The largest bald eagle nest ever found was nine and a half feet wide, 20 feet tall and weighed nearly 6,000 pounds.

The eagles incubate their eggs for 34-36 days, hatch in the spring. Eaglets are born immobile, with downy feathers and open eyes. Both the males and females will tend the young birds until they fledge the nest. Immature eagles stay in the nest for 70-98 days and are ready to leave by the end of the summer.

## CONSERVATION

Reproductive impairment due to pesticides and habitat loss are the main reasons for this species' decline in population. After World War II, farmers throughout the country used the pesticide DDT. The pesticide would run off crops and soil into nearby water sources. Aquatic plants absorbed the pesticide

and were in turn eaten by crustaceans, which were then eaten by small fish. Birds that depended on fish as a major source of their diet, such as bald eagles and pelicans, gathered DDT in their bodies through bio-



**Like many raptors, bald eagles have amazing eye sight and are able to see small rodents at several hundred yards.**

concentration, the build up of pesticides in birds high on the food chain. DDT, which causes the thinning of the eagles' eggshells, greatly reduced the number of young birds for much of the twentieth century. By the early 1960's there were fewer than 500 pairs of bald eagles in the United States. Since the banning of DDT in 1972, populations of bald

eagles have rebounded significantly.

In parts of the United States, there are conservation areas specifically for bald eagles. One such area is the Chilkat River Valley in Alaska with over 80 bald eagle nests. Currently there are about 20,000 eagles in the lower 48 states and about 35,000 in Alaska alone. Although eagle populations are recovering rapidly, the bald eagle is listed as an endangered species in most of the United States. The bald eagle is protected under various acts such as the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940, the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, and the Lacey Act.



*Compiled by Lindsay Hoffmann & Tim O'Keefe  
Photos by Todd Patrick*

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## ROARING FORK CONSERVANCY

P.O. Box 3349, Basalt, Colorado 81621  
(970) 927-1290 [www.roaringfork.org](http://www.roaringfork.org)

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