



Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Celebrated as the national symbol of the United States since 1872, the bald eagle is currently listed as an endangered species. Benjamin Franklin accused the bird of “bad moral character” because of its habits of stealing fish from ospreys and scavenging carrion. *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* means “sea eagle with a white head.” Like other sea eagles, the bald eagle lives near water and relies on powerful wings and talons to scavenge fish, its main source of food. Once rare in North America, the bald eagle is now making a comeback.

History and Status

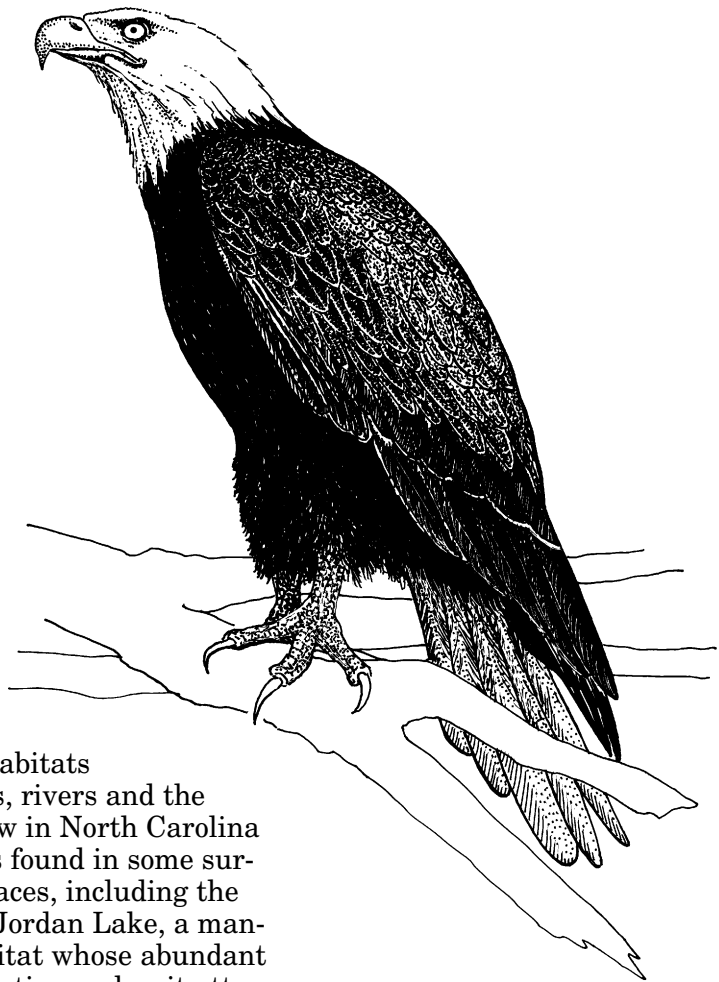
As far back as 1700, explorer John Lawson found bald eagles plentiful along North Carolina waterways but divided them into two species, the “eagle bald” (bald meaning white) and the “eagle gray,” which was actually the juvenile of the species. Settlers and bounty hunters shot and trapped great numbers of the birds, and by the end of the 19th century the bald eagle population had declined throughout North America. In 1940 Congress passed the Bald Eagle Act, protecting the bird from further destruction. Still, populations plummeted in the 1940s and '50s after the pesticide DDT was introduced. The chemical accumulated in the food chain of eagles and other birds, resulting in thin eggshells that collapsed when the parents attempted to brood their eggs.

Since the banning of DDT, bald eagles have slowly repopulated

suitable habitats near lakes, rivers and the ocean. Now in North Carolina the bird is found in some surprising places, including the shores of Jordan Lake, a man-made habitat whose abundant fish population makes it attractive for eagles.

Description

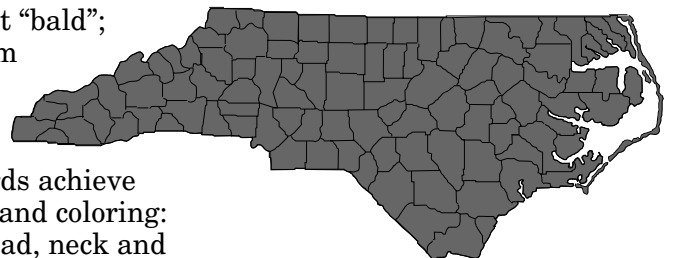
One of the largest raptors in North America, the bald eagle weighs 8 to 13 pounds; the female is larger than the male. The wing-span may be 7 or 8 feet across, and the bird's body can stretch 3 feet from beak to tail. Juveniles are uniformly dark brown or mottled, with dark beaks, talons and eyes. In flight, the underside of the juvenile's wings may be streaked or mottled with white feathers. The bald eagle isn't “bald”; its name comes from the white feathers over the entire head. After five to six years, the birds achieve full adult plumage and coloring: a brilliant white head, neck and tail; bright yellow beak and feet; and pale yellow eyes. Bald eagles



hold their wings flat when soaring high in the sky, unlike vultures and other large birds whose wings make a slight vee.

Habitat and Habits

The bald eagle prefers habitat near lakes, large rivers, and shorelines of sounds and bays. The bird requires tall, isolated trees for perching and nesting. Its large wings are adapted for catching late-morning and midday thermal updrafts, which give a high-altitude vantage point for



Range Map:

Found statewide

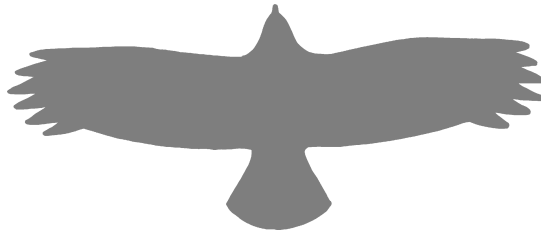
seeking out and scavenging fish and other foods. Opportunistic by nature, the eagle is fond of stealing food from ospreys and other birds, and it scavenges the shoreline for dead or dying fish, as well as plucking them live from the water. In winter, when food is scarce, bald eagles consume a wider variety of prey, including water birds, rabbits and carrion.

The bald eagle needs a tall, living tree for its huge nest, preferably a tree with a stout vee or several branches making a sturdy crotch. Nests are up to 8 feet wide and 20 feet deep, made of sticks and lined with grasses. Pairs often return and layer new nest material over the old from year to year.

In North Carolina, new non-breeding populations have appeared in the past 10 years, notably at Jordan Lake and lakes along the Yadkin River in the Piedmont. In addition, successful nests have recently been discovered in as many as 10 locations, some near Greensboro and Raleigh, at Jordan Lake and Falls Lake, and several in the Albemarle Sound area. Nationwide, populations have strengthened to the point that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is considering downgrading the eagle from Endangered status to Threatened status. However, the eagle would still be on the "endangered species list" as a protected Federal species.

Range and Distribution

Native only to North America, the bald eagle was once abundant in both the East and West, from Canada to the Gulf Coast. Once extirpated from much of its range, it is now making a comeback on its own and through reintroduction programs in some states. The birds coming to North Carolina are probably overflow populations from the Chesapeake Bay and from Florida. Juveniles typically scout new territories and often



flight silhouette

expand the range by finding new habitat suitable for nesting.

People Interactions

These days people enjoy watching the bald eagle's soaring flight near non-breeding roosts at Piedmont lakes and near the coast. Because of their similar size and habits, ospreys are often mistaken for bald eagles by casual observers. Unlike ospreys, however, bald eagles usually build their nests far away from boat traffic or human habitation. Despite the eagle's comeback in North Carolina, its population will continue to be limited by the number of suitable roosting and nesting sites and the availability of fish.

References

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Credits

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WILD Facts

BALD EAGLE

Classification

Class: Aves

Order: Falconiformes

Average Size

Body: Up to 3 ft. long, beak to tail.

Wingspan: 7 to 8 ft.

Weight: 8 to 13 lbs.

Food

Bald eagles feed on fish, water birds, small mammals and carrion. They usually scavenge sick or dying prey, but will take food from other birds if they can.

Breeding

Pairs mate, nest and raise young. Breeding occurs in spring, soon after spring migration to breeding territory. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the young. Adult pairs may migrate together in the fall to wintering grounds.

Young

Nests produce 1 to 3 eggs, of which 1 or 2 eaglets may survive to fledge. In North Carolina, nesting begins in January. Eggs hatch after 30 to 40 days of incubation. Parents take turns brooding, guarding and feeding young. Nestlings fledge after about 11 weeks.

Life Expectancy

Up to 50 years in good conditions.