

# Bald Eagle

*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*



## Physical Characteristics

- Sexual dimorphism: Females are larger and heavier than males.
- Coloration: Adults have dark brown bodies and wings. The beak and feet are yellow with black talons. The tail feathers, neck and head are white.
  - Young bald eagles' bodies, eyes and beaks are dark brown, with white underwing coverts and axillaries.
  - 2<sup>nd</sup> Year - eyes lighten to a grayish-brown and their body becomes mottled white.
  - 3<sup>rd</sup> Year - beak and eyes begin to turn yellow and their head feathers lighten.
  - 4<sup>th</sup> Year - their body mostly darkens (with some beige around their eyes and crown) and their head and tail become mostly white, with isolated dark spots on their tail.
  - 5<sup>th</sup> Year On - reach their mature coloration, including yellow eyes and beak, white head and tail, and dark brown, almost black bodies. Their coloration gets more consistent as they age.

## Size

- Height: 31-37 inches (about 3 feet)
- Weight: Depending on location, 8-18 pounds; southern bald eagles are smaller than northern.
- Wingspan: 70-90 inches (5.8-7.5 feet)

## Lifespan

- Wild: 15-30 years. The oldest banded wild eagle survived 38 years.
- Zoos: 20-30 years. Some have lived up to 50 years in human care.

## Behaviors

- Activity Cycle: Diurnal, arboreal, and migratory. They spend the majority of their time resting (91%). They are less active in the winter and during bad weather, when it would impact their foraging success.
- Vocalizations: relatively weak, high pitched, thin vocalizations, composed of chirps, whistles, wails, peals (long, high-pitched alert cry) and harsh chatters ('kwit, kwit, kwit, kwit, kee-kee-kee-kee-ker'). Pairs vocalize to each other upon return to the nest.
- Social Structure: Monogamous (pair for life) however they are usually found alone or in pairs. In areas with abundant prey (such as along the Mississippi River), they may roost in large groups.
- Migration: Bald Eagles typically use partial migration when flying south for the winter. They may fly as far south as Florida or Mexico or they may stay put in areas that have sufficient resources along river edges. While migrating over long distances, they use slow wing beats and soar from early morning to evening, roosting at night. They use landmarks for navigation.

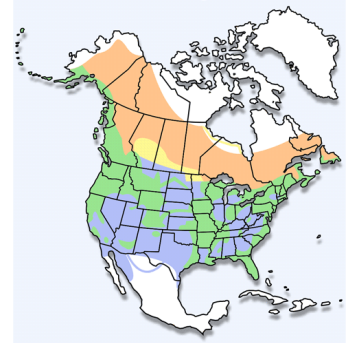
## Diet

- Wild: Opportunistic foragers: preferring fish, however another large portion of their diet is the various water birds and water bird eggs. In the winter, they shift to eating carrion (including elk, moose, etc.) and small mammals (including ground squirrels, voles, etc.).
- Zoos: A meat blend specially formulated for birds of prey, as well as rats and fish.

## Reproduction

- Incubation Period: 35 days
- Fledging/Parenting: 8-14 weeks, depending on location; both parents help raise offspring - females tend to brood, males tend to bring more food. Even after fledging phase, juveniles may continue their dependency for an additional 4 to 11 weeks.
- Clutch Size: 1-3, average of 2 eggs per season

- **Breeding Behaviors:** Bald eagles mate for life. They do elaborate “dances” upon reuniting with their mate which involve swooping and cart wheels, clasping their feet, and spinning toward the ground, separating before returning to the skies. These birds nest in the canopy of tall coniferous trees, often surrounded by smaller trees.



### **Habitat and Range**

- **Habitat:** Areas near large water bodies such as sea coasts, coastal estuaries and inland lakes and rivers, where food is available. They will inhabit areas further from foraging grounds to avoid human interaction.
- **Range:** Found throughout North America, specifically native to Canada, the United States, and parts of Mexico

### **Conservation**

- **IUCN Status:** Least Concern
- **Threats:** The population of Bald Eagles were in severe decline since the early and mid- 1900’s by hunting, habitat destruction. The Bald Eagle Protection Act was put into effect in 1940, although their populations continued to decline through the 1950’s and 70’s due to the use of the insecticide DDT. This chemical negatively affected many species, causing neurological damage and deformities. It also weakened eagle egg shells, making them brittle and preventing hatching. In 1972, DDT was banned in the United States.
- **Recovery:** Bald eagles were first listed as an endangered species in 1967 under the Endangered Species Preservation Act and later transferred to list of threatened and endangered species under the 1973 Endangered Species Act. Through federal protection, the ban of DDT, habitat preservation and restoration, conservation breeding and reintroduction efforts, the Bald eagle population was able to recover and it was removed from the Endangered Species List in 2007. Bald Eagles are still protected in the United States by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act as well as the Migratory Bird Treaty Act. These laws prohibit the harming, selling of any parts, or killing of bald or golden eagles.

### **Classification**

- |                         |                                    |
|-------------------------|------------------------------------|
| • Kingdom: Animalia     | • Order: Falconiformes             |
| • Phylum: Chordata      | • Family: Accipitridae             |
| • Subphylum: Vertebrata | • Genus: <i>Haliaeetus</i>         |
| • Class: Aves           | • Species: <i>H. leucocephalus</i> |

### **Interesting Facts**

- The word “bald” refers to the German word meaning “white,” not that they are bald or featherless.
- Their plumage alone weighs about 1.5 pounds (twice as much as their skeleton).
- Bald eagles can survive without food for several days. When food is available, bald eagles often eat as much as possible and store food in their crop (throat pouch) for later digestion.

### **References**

- *Bald Eagle*. 2025. US Fish and Wildlife Service. <https://www.fws.gov/species/bald-eagle-haliaeetus-leucocephalus> Accessed June 30, 2025
- *Bald Eagles Frequently Asked Questions*. National Eagle Center. <https://www.nationaleaglecenter.org/learn/faq/> Accessed June 14, 2019
- BirdLife International. 2024. *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*. The IUCN Red List of Threatened Species 2024: e.T22695144A264598530. <https://dx.doi.org/10.2305/IUCN.UK.2024-2.RLTS.T22695144A264598530.en>. Accessed on 30 January 2025.
- HHMI Tangled Bank Studios. 2024. Conservation Comeback: The Bald Eagle. Wild Hope. <https://www.wildhope.tv/article/conservation-comeback-the-bald-eagle/> Accessed June 26, 2024
- Siciliano Martina, L. 2013. *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, Animal Diversity Web. [https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Haliaeetus\\_leucocephalus/](https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Haliaeetus_leucocephalus/) Accessed June 14, 2019