

# The Bald Eagle: More than Just a Symbol

As our nation's emblem, the bald eagle represents freedom, strength, and beauty for many Americans. Spotting a bald eagle soaring through Ohio skies is a treat. With its striking white and brown markings and a wingspan of up to 7.5 feet, it is no wonder that it was chosen as the national symbol in 1782. However, few realize the extent of this bird's remarkable characteristics and the struggle it has endured to survive as a species.

As Ohio's largest bird of prey, the average adult bald eagle weighs 10 to 12 pounds and is 34 to 43 inches long. The female is slightly larger than the male, but both have a high-pitched squeaky voice that sounds like a cackle. Snow white feathers cover the bird's head and tail, while the rest of its body is dark brown. This appearance makes adult eagles easy to spot. However, you may have seen an immature bald eagle and not even known it. Immature eagles, who are younger than 5 years old, are mostly brown with speckles of cream and beige on their undersides.

When they reach adulthood, bald eagles begin their search for a mate. Although some research disagrees, it is commonly thought that most eagles mate for life. Between October and December, both recently mated and established pairs go through a process called pair bonding. This includes beautiful aerial displays in which a pair of eagles will ritualistically soar through the air, dipping towards the ground together and then ascending again toward the sky.



*Story by Kelly Crews, Marketing Intern  
Photos by John Pogacnik, Biologist*

Nest building also occurs during this time. Because these birds are known to adopt old nests and add at least 6 inches of material to them every year, these nests grow to be quite large. While a typical nest is approximately 5 feet wide, some have been found to be as much as 9 feet wide. In fact, a nest called the "Great Nest" was found in Vermillion, Ohio. Weighing approximately two tons, it was a massive 8.5 feet wide and 12 feet deep. Bald eagles have been using this nest for more than 35 years.

Female bald eagles usually produce two eggs. Both males and females take turns incubating and



hunting for food. When the eggs hatch, the pair also share in the feeding of the eaglets. The eaglets will remain in the nest for 3 or 4 months and then begin to explore. Most young eagles are fully independent by 5 months of age and practice their hunting skills until they are fully mature.

The bald eagle's favorite meal is fish. With the ability to spot a fish from up to two miles away, an eagle's vision makes it an excellent hunter. It uses its large talons, which are covered with spicules (small spikes), to swoop down and grab onto its prey in the water. Another large part of the eagle's diet consists of small animals and other birds. Although many people think of the bald eagle solely as a predator, it is not uncommon for these birds to also scavenge for carrion. They will do this during the winter when food is scarce.

Today, Ohio is home to many of these impressive birds. However, we were not always so lucky. In 1979, there were four nesting pairs of bald eagles in all of Ohio, a species that had been abundant before Europeans settled in America. The clearing of forests in the 18th and 19th centuries destroyed much of the eagle's habitat. DDT and other dangerous pesticides that were used on farms in the 1950s also had devastating effects on the bald eagle population in Ohio. Through runoff, these chemicals entered rivers and lakes and were then passed on to the fish and small animals that make up an eagle's diet. This caused a major disturbance in reproduction. Many eagles became sterile or produced eggs with extremely thin shells that were easily broken. Adult eagles were dying and no eaglets were being produced. Ironically, the bird chosen to represent the spirit of our nation was well on its way to extinction.

Even after DDT and other pesticides were declared illegal, Ohio's eagle population continued to suffer. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) Division of Wildlife soon realized that something proactive needed to be done. In 1979, ODNR established the bald eagle restoration program, whose goal was to increase populations by monitoring and managing them. Healthy eaglets were raised in captivity and then placed in existing nests to be adopted by adult eagles. The project was very involved, requiring trained staff to climb trees, feed eaglets with a glove resembling a beak and even build artificial nests. Time and effort paid off and the project's goals were soon surpassed. The effort to rehabilitate injured eagles was also a likely contributor to the comeback of the population in our state. As a member of the National Wildlife Rehabilitators Association, the Kevin P. Clinton Wildlife Center at Penitentiary Glen Reservation has, itself, nursed several eagles back to health.

In the 2007 Mid-Winter Bald Eagle Survey, there were a total of 480 bald eagles observed in Ohio, including sightings in 53 of our state's 88 counties. The state has a record 164 nests – 116 of which hatched at least one chick this year. Nine bald eagles and several nests were observed in Lake County. The marshes of western Lake Erie are known to have the highest concentration of eagles in the state. Within Lake County, eagles are most common near the forested Grand River corridors and along the lakefront. However, our county continues to present limitations for bald eagles, just as much of Ohio does. According to Lake Metroparks Chief of Interpretive Services Ann Bugada, development, especially agricultural, is a constant threat to the wetland habitat of the eagles in Lake County. Without sufficient food, water and space, eagles will choose other, more remote parts of Ohio to nest. In addition to development, the contamination of Lake Erie and low water quality in rivers and streams is also a concern. Clean water means a larger number and variety of fish, which will in turn attract eagles.

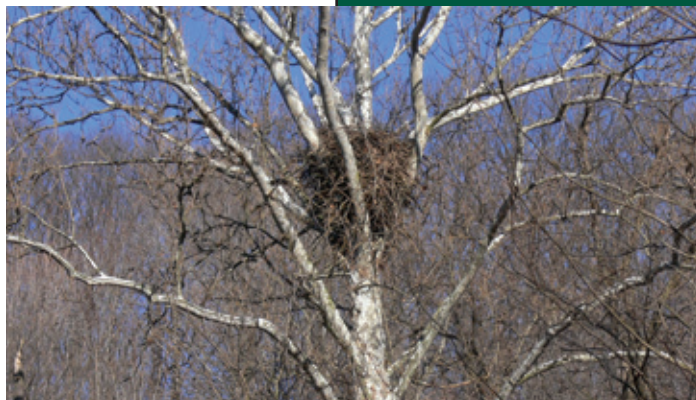
Although we think of the eagle as a fierce creature, it is important to remember that it is also extremely sensitive. At even small levels of human disturbance, eagles are known to abandon their young or nest in search of more remote locations. The Endangered Species Act and the Bald Eagle Protection Act protect all bald eagles and their nests. While keeping your eyes open for these majestic birds near river corridors and lakefront parks, it is important to respect their privacy. Use binoculars to catch a glimpse of an animal without disturbing it.

If you would like to learn more about bald eagles and see one in person, Animal Planet's Volunteer Hero of the Year will be showing and discussing eagles at the Wildlife Festival on September 30 at Penitentiary Glen Reservation (more information on page 17). The bald eagle is our nation's symbol, however, this is not the only reason it deserves respect. It is a unique and magnificent bird whose population will hopefully continue to increase in Lake County and throughout the United States.

## THE LIFE CYCLE OF A BALD EAGLE



- **October-early December:** Adult eagles perform aerial mating displays, mate and begin nest building
- **February-March:** Adult female lays eggs, incubation lasts 35 days
- **March-May:** Eaglets hatch and are fed by parents
- **June-August:** Eaglets develop flight feathers, begin to explore, but are still dependent on parents
- **August-October:** Young eagles become fully independent and learn how to hunt on their own
- **November-December:** Immature eagles migrate and spend 4-5 years hunting. Once mature, they will begin the life cycle again.



*Eagle nest in Lake County*

*The U.S. Interior Department recently removed this majestic bird from the protection of the Endangered Species Act, capping a four-decade struggle for recovery.*