

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

Pennsylvania Threatened Bird Species

State Rank: S2B (impered, breeding) **Global Rank: G4** (apparently secure)

Identification

Bald Eagles are large raptors with a body length up to 32 inches and a wingspan up to 80 inches. Male and female Bald Eagles are similar in plumage. The most notable features are a white head and upper neck, whiter tail, dark brown body, and a heavy yellow bill. Juveniles are dark brown overall, and gradually acquire adult plumage over a period of four years. Juveniles have a dark bill and cere, dark brown body plumage, including head and tail, variable amounts of white on the undertail coverts, belly, and back.



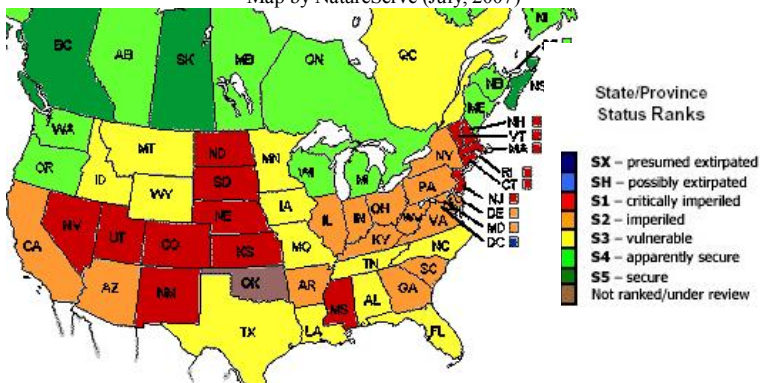
photo source: Ron Austing

Range

Bald Eagles have extensive breeding populations in Alaska, with major populations in the coastal regions. This species breeds throughout most of Canada, especially along coastal areas. In the continental United States, Bald Eagles breed extensively along the Atlantic Coast from Florida to the Maritime Provinces of Canada. Also, this species breeds in the Great Lake States in Minnesota, Michigan, and Wisconsin, and in the Pacific Northwest (California, Oregon, and Washington). Breeding populations occur along the Gulf Coast in Louisiana and Texas. In Pennsylvania, Bald Eagle populations have been increasing, and can now be found throughout Pennsylvania, with most sightings concentrated in the northwestern and southeastern corners of the state.

North American State/Province Conservation Status

Map by NatureServe (July, 2007)



Habitat

This species is typically associated with forested areas adjacent to large bodies of water. Bald Eagles nest in trees, rarely on cliff faces, and ground nest in treeless areas. The majority of Bald Eagle nesting areas are found in mature and old-growth forests with some habitat edge, usually within 2 kilometers to water with suitable foraging opportunities. The quality of foraging areas are defined by diversity, abundance, and vulnerability of the prey base, structure of aquatic habitats, such as the presence of shallow water, and the absence of human development and disturbance. In Pennsylvania, this species nests on islands in major rivers and in forested areas and erected platforms along major rivers, reservoirs, large wetlands, lakes, ponds, and streams.

Conservation Status

This species is currently listed as a Threatened species at the state and federal level. Bald Eagles breeding in Pennsylvania have made a major contribution to the downgrading of this species from Endangered. In the 1970's, Bald Eagle nesting pairs were at an all time low of two due to the effect of the insecticide DDT and pollution of major waterways. Since then, this species has made a comeback, and recently, over 100 nests have been recorded across the state. Continued success of the breeding areas will depend on protection from human persecution and environmental contaminants. Other threats include water quality degradation, disturbance of nesting areas, and disease. If ecological conditions in Pennsylvania continue to improve, there is no reason why this species will not increase nesting populations to increase assurance that Bald Eagles will be around for generations to come.

Pennsylvania Distribution by County



Pennsylvania Natural Heritage Program data 2007

References

- Buehler, David A. 2000. The Birds of North America, No. 506: Life Histories for the 21st Century Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*).
- Brauning, D.W. (ed). 1992. Atlas of Breeding Birds in Pennsylvania Univ. of Pittsburg Press, Pittsburg, PA. 484 pp.
- Gough, G.A., Sauer, J.R., Iliff, M. Patuxent Bird Identification Infocenter. 1998. Version 97.1 Patuxent Wildlife Research Center, Laurel, MD. <http://www.mbr-pwrc.usgs.gov/Infocenter/infocenter.html>



