



# THE Bald Eagle

## IN MISSOURI

To the surprise of many people, Missouri is one of the leading wintering bald eagle states. Each fall, thousands of these great birds migrate south from their nesting range in Canada and the Great Lakes states to hunt around the open waters of our rivers and lakes.

Eagles take up residence wherever they find open water and plentiful food. Missouri, because of its big rivers and many lakes, reservoirs, and wetlands, is especially attractive to these large, magnificent birds.

Each year, approximately 1,200 to 2,700 bald eagles are reported in Missouri during winter.



### A National Symbol

The bald eagle has been the national emblem of the United States since 1782 and a spiritual symbol for native people for far longer than that. It has been a symbol of strength, courage, and freedom in the United States for centuries. In 2024, the bald eagle was rightfully recognized as America's official national bird, bestowing an honor that was long overdue.

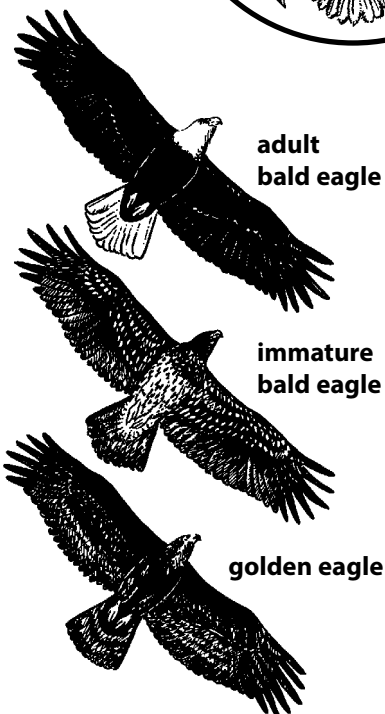
When adopted as our national emblem in 1782, bald eagles were flourishing with an estimated 100,000 nesting pairs. The first major decline of the species probably began in the mid to late 1800s, coinciding with the decline of waterfowl, shorebirds and other prey.

By the mid-1900s, the bald eagle was in danger of extinction throughout most of its range. Bald eagles were decimated by habitat destruction and degradation, as well as illegal and indiscriminate shooting and the contamination of their food source by DDT.

By 1963, with only 417 nesting pairs of bald eagles known to exist, the species was in danger of extinction throughout most of its range. Protection afforded under the Endangered Species Act, increased law enforcement, nest site protection during the breeding season and reintroduction efforts, the bald eagle staged a remarkable population rebound.

The bald eagle was removed from the Endangered Species Act protection in 2007, and its population recovery is among the most successful conservation stories in North America. Bald eagle populations throughout the country have continued to rise with an estimated 316,700 individuals, including 71,467 breeding pairs (based on USFWS 2018-2019 data).

Bald eagles remain federally protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918. In Missouri, the bald eagle remains a species of conservation concern.





## Restoring Eagle Nesting in Missouri

Nesting bald eagles were common in Missouri in the early 1800s. By 1890, they nearly were eliminated as nesters. Before the cypress forests were cut and the swamps drained, the main concentration of nesting bald eagles was in the cypress swamps of the Bootheel. This habitat loss, along with hunting and persecution in the late 1800s, is what initially decimated Missouri's bald eagle population. Missouri's eagles already were gone by the mid-1900s when DDT was reducing hatching success in other parts of the country.

From 1981 to 1990, MDC, in cooperation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Dickerson Park Zoo of Springfield, released 74 young bald eagles in Missouri to reestablish them as nesters.

Eagles 6 to 7 weeks old were obtained from captive breeding facilities or healthy wild populations and released each summer from artificial nests into two areas with good nesting habitat: Mingo National Wildlife Refuge in southeast Missouri and Schell-Osage Conservation area northwest of El Dorado Springs.

The young eagles imprinted on these regions where they took their first flights, and many returned to Missouri to breed as adults. This program, plus the eagle's tendency to return naturally to its former nesting range, has enabled eagles to once again nest in Missouri.

## Eagle Watch Program

Tracking the progress of bald eagles in Missouri is more than MDC can handle alone, which is why the department began the Eagle Watch Program (EWP) in 2018. EWP volunteers contribute to real science by monitoring known eagle nests — and reporting previously undocumented nests — and collecting information necessary for the conservation of bald eagles in Missouri.

## EWP Objectives

- Increase public awareness and education to ensure the continued recovery of the bald eagle.
- Educate volunteer participants in general eagle nesting biology, applicable laws, identification of nest threats, and monitoring techniques.
- Locate new nests and verify and update existing nest information.
- Compile data for publication and distribution to the public.

## Nest Monitor Requirements

- During the breeding season, make a minimum of three visits to the nest and record activity and number of young, if any.
- Spend a minimum of 30 minutes watching the nest at each visit.
- Commit to approximately 10 hours annually, watch a training video, read, sign and return program forms.

To learn more, visit [mdc.mo.gov/eagle-watch-program](http://mdc.mo.gov/eagle-watch-program), call 573-522-4115, or email [eaglewatch@mdc.mo.gov](mailto:eaglewatch@mdc.mo.gov).



## A Winter Home

Throughout the nesting season, bald eagles are rather solitary. During the winter, however, they congregate near open water in tall trees for spotting prey and night roosts for sheltering. Missouri continues to be one of the leading states for wintering eagles.

Adults typically return to their former nest site in October or November to begin refurbishing their nest and preparing for the nesting season.

## The Eagle and Law

While the recovery of the bald eagle led to its removal from the shield of the Endangered Species Act in 2007, it retains its protected status through federal law and international treaty.

## Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act

The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act — enacted in 1940 and amended several times since — provides criminal penalties for persons who “take, possess, sell, purchase, barter, offer to sell, purchase or barter, transport, export or import, at any time or any manner, any bald eagle ... [or any golden eagle], alive or dead, or any part (including feathers), nest, or egg thereof” unless granted a permit issued by the Secretary of the Interior.

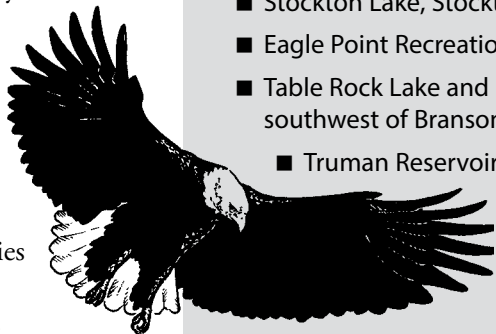
In addition to take, human activities around a previously used nest site during a time when eagles are not present can result in penalties, if, upon the eagle's return, such activities agitate or bother an eagle to a degree that interferes with or interrupts normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering habits, and causes injury, death, or nest abandonment.

A violation of the act can result in a fine of \$100,000 (\$200,000 for organizations), imprisonment for one year, or both, for a first offense. Penalties increase substantially for additional offenses, and a second violation of the act is a felony.

## Winter Eagle Viewing Hot Spots

From late December through early February, eagles often can be found perched in large trees, especially along the edge of open water. Early morning arrivals are best for seeing eagles flying and feeding. Many locations are known for good eagle viewing:

- Eagle Bluff Conservation Area, off Route K, southwest of Columbia
- Bagnell Dam Access, Lake of the Ozarks
- Lock and Dam 20, Canton
- Lock and Dam 24, Clarksville
- Mingo National Wildlife Refuge, northwest of Puxico
- Riverlands Environmental Demonstration Area, West Alton
- Schell-Osage Conservation Area, north of El Dorado Springs
- Loess Bluffs National Wildlife Refuge, south of Mound City
- Swan Lake National Wildlife Refuge, south of Sumner
- Old Chain of Rocks Bridge, south of I-270 off Riverview Drive, St. Louis
- Smithville Lake, north of Kansas City
- Stockton Lake, Stockton
- Eagle Point Recreation Area, Lake Wappapello, Wappapello
- Table Rock Lake and Shepherd of the Hills Fish Hatchery, southwest of Branson
- Truman Reservoir, Warsaw
- Duck Creek Conservation Area, north of Puxico on Highway 51 in Stoddard
- Moses Eagle Park, Stella



## Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918

The Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) of 1918 implements four international conservation treaties between the U.S., Canada, Mexico, Japan, and Russia. It is intended to ensure the sustainability of populations of all protected bird species that migrate across international borders.

The MBTA prohibits the take (including killing, capturing, selling, trading, and transporting) of protected migratory bird species without prior authorization by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Penalties under the MTBA include a maximum of two years imprisonment and \$250,000 fine and six months imprisonment for a felony conviction or six months imprisonment or \$5,000 fine for a misdemeanor conviction. The fines are doubled for organizations.

If you have information about an eagle death or nest disturbance, you should contact your local conservation agent or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service immediately. Eagle killings or nest disturbances can be reported in confidence by calling Operation Game Thief at 800-392-1111.

## The Future

Although no longer federally listed as threatened, the bald eagle still faces many human-caused threats including habitat loss, lead poisoning, illegal shooting, disease, collision with motor vehicles and wind turbines and electrocution by power lines.



## Facts

**Name:** The term “bald” is a bit confusing. It refers to the Old English word “balde” — meaning white — rather than without feathers. The scientific name, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, means white-headed sea eagle.

**Eyesight:** Eagle vision is four to six times sharper than a human’s.

**Beak:** The eagle’s hooked beak is used for tearing flesh.

**Size:** One of the largest birds of prey in the world, bald eagles have a 6 1/2- to 8-foot wingspan and are 3 to 3 1/2 feet tall, weighing 10 to 15 pounds. In many birds of prey, the female is larger than the male. However, unless birds are perched next to each other, sexes cannot be told apart.

**Foods:** The bald eagle is an opportunistic forager, foraging throughout the day but concentrating on the early morning. While fish is its primary food, its diet also includes birds, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. It secures food through direct capture, scavenging dead prey, or stealing from other bald eagles, other raptors, or mammals. It hunts in flight, from perches, by wading in water, or through cooperative hunting.

**Young:** Eagles commonly lay two eggs, but this can range from one to three. The eggs are dull white with no markings. The young leave the nest 8 to 14 weeks after hatching, depending on sex and hatching order on growth and development.

**Speed:** Eagles fly 20 to 40 miles per hour and can reach speeds of more than 100 miles an hour while diving.

**Talons:** Talons are essential tools for survival and are used for hunting, transporting nesting materials, perching on branches and grooming.

**Age:** Bald eagles live 15 to 30 years in the wild but have lived over 40 years in captivity.

**Nests:** Nests usually are built in the top of a large tree. Each year in late fall or early winter, an eagle pair adds to the nest. A bald eagle nest can become the largest of any North American bird. The national record is 20 feet deep and 10 feet wide, weighing 2 tons. In Missouri, nests average about 5 feet wide and 2 to 4 feet deep.

**Mortality rate:** On average, biologists estimate that there is a 40 to 50 percent mortality rate for bald eagles during their first year.

**Color:** The distinctive white head and tail are marks of an adult — a sexually mature bird that is at least 4 to 5 years old. The younger bird’s plumage varies from solid, dark brown to mottled brown and white. Males and females are colored alike.

**Range:** The bald eagle is indigenous to only North America. Its range includes most of Canada and Alaska, northern Mexico and the contiguous U.S. It is the only sea eagle endemic to North America.



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## How Else Can You Protect Bald Eagles?

1. Learn more about eagles by reading books, attending events such as MDC’s Eagle Days, and supporting conservation organizations.
2. Observe nests from a safe distance using binoculars or spotting scopes.
3. Report eagle nest disturbance to MDC or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
4. Report sick, injured, or dead bald eagles to your local conservation agent, MDC office, local sheriff’s department, or licensed wildlife rehabilitator.