



Photo by R.L. Langston

# Bald Eagles

BY TOM HESS

**T**he nation's forefathers adopted the bald eagle as our national symbol in 1782. The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is the second largest bird of prey in North America and was a common south Louisiana resident during the early 1900s.

Population levels of the bird, unknown during the early part of the century, plunged to unprecedented lows in the 1950s. Only four active nests were identified in Louisiana between 1954 and 1960. Personnel of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reported six or seven active bald eagle nests in Louisiana in 1972. Many factors — including habitat destruction, contaminants, human disturbance, and shooting — contributed to the decline nationwide.

The major factor contributing to the nationwide decline of bald eagles, peregrine

falcons, brown pelicans, and other birds of prey from the 1950s through the 1970s was the use of DDT. This pesticide concentrated in prey commonly eaten by the birds. It altered the birds' calcium production, resulting in eggs with thin shells that broke under the weight of incubating adults.

Fortunately, the cause of the breeding failures was identified in time. The use of DDT was banned in the United States in 1972.

Wayne Dubuc, a noted Louisiana eagle expert from Patterson, initiated the first formal Louisiana bald eagle survey in 1974. He documented five active nesting territories in the Morgan City area during the first survey.

An active nesting territory consists of one or more nests in an area used by a pair of eagles. Many territories have two or three

nests that are alternated from year to year. Most nests in Louisiana are found from New Iberia to the Mississippi state line along the marsh/swamp interface where cypress trees and marsh grasses integrate, but are now found statewide. Nests are now documented in Avoyelles, Bossier, Calcasieu, Morehouse, Sabine, St. Landry and Tensas parishes.

Adult bald eagles are large, dark-bodied birds with white head and tail feathers. Immature birds are mostly dark brown with blotchy white under the wings and tail. It takes four to five years for an immature eagle to attain the characteristic white head and tail feathers.

Female bald eagles are larger than males and weigh up to 14 pounds, while males average eight to 10 pounds. Eagles range from three to three and a half feet in length, with a six to eight-foot wingspan.

Louisiana bald eagles are winter/spring nesters. The birds begin nesting activities in December and young birds generally leave the nest by mid-May. Nests are usually found in tall, dominant trees towering above the surrounding forest or swamp. Bald cypress are preferred trees, but nests are also found in live oak and pine trees.

Nests are constructed of sticks and can be six to eight feet in diameter. Females lay an average of two off-white eggs, which hatch in 35 days. Young eagles fledge (acquiring the feathers necessary for flight) and leave the nest 12 weeks after hatching. Bald eagles feed on fish, waterfowl and furbearers. They arrive in Louisiana by October and migrate to the northern states and Canada by June.

The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF) began formal bald eagle surveys in 1984. Aerial surveys are conducted by fixed-wing aircraft or helicopter, beginning in January and continuing through May. Each nest is visited twice and nest condition, activity, eggs present and age of young are recorded.

The Global Positioning System (GPS) is used to map and locate nests. GPS equipment produces precise latitude and longitude coordinates that facilitate nest revisitation.

LDWF biologists analyze survey information to compute productivity figures. During the 1994-95 nesting season, 101 active nesting territories produced 157 young. Rapid population expansion in recent years can be attributed to an overall improvement in

Louisiana's environment, habitat protection, and the general public's environmental awareness.

Most of Louisiana's bald eagle habitat is protected by both the state and federal wetlands permit system. LDWF provides survey information to state and federal agencies, which use it during permit review.

Agencies follow parameters set forth in "Management Guidelines for the Bald Eagle in the Southeast Region." Human activities are regulated within a 1,500-foot radius of nest trees from Oct. 1 to May 15. Disturbance may also be minimized within a one-mile radius of a nest tree if necessary. Agencies work to minimize impacts associated with development, and assist developers with viable "work-around" strategies when a project occurs in close proximity to a nest.

Bald eagles are protected under the Bald Eagle Protection Act Migratory Bird Treaty Act, and Endangered Species Act. It is unlawful to harass, take, or possess a live or dead bald eagle, any part of the eagle, a nest, or an egg. Violations can result in fines ranging from \$500 to \$20,000 and prison terms of six months to two years.

The bald eagle was "downlisted" from endangered to threatened in the contiguous 48 states on July 12, 1995. The intent of the Endangered Species Act, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, is "... to recover species to the point where they are again viable, self-sustaining members of their ecosystems, and protection under the Act is no longer necessary. Successful recovery and removal from the endangered and threatened list is the service's final goal for the bald eagle."

Bald eagles have made a notable comeback throughout the Southeast. From 1984 to 1994, the population increased from 454 occupied nesting territories to 1,099. If current population trends remain constant and if no decline in productivity occurs, bald eagles should be completely "delisted" in the Southeast region by the turn of the century.

Public environmental awareness has been a major component of Louisiana's bald eagle recovery. Citizens report nest sightings, eagle harassment and violation incidents to DWF personnel of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. That facilitates survey and enforcement activities.

The bald eagle program has become yet another wildlife management success story. ♣

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