

Louisiana's BALD EAGLE Program



Photo by Lynn Stone

A National Symbol Gets Local Attention

**STORY BY
THOMAS HESS JR.**

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. Bald eagle numbers declined throughout the twentieth century and by 1972 only six or seven active nesting territories were reported in Louisiana. The major factor contributing to the decline of the bald eagle population was the use of DDT from the 1950s through the 1970s. DDT altered the birds' calcium production, resulting in eggs with thin shells that broke under the weight of incubating birds. As a result of these findings, the use of DDT was banned in the United States in 1972.

In the early 1970s U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) biologist Ray Aycock began conducting aerial bald eagle nest surveys. Ray was aided by noted eagle expert Wayne Dubuc, a private citizen with a acute interest in bald eagles. In 1984 the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

(LDWF) began its own formal bald eagle surveys with fixed wing aircraft and helicopters. Dubuc helped the Department establish the surveys and continues to participate in the program today.

Present 2000

Since the movement to re-establish the bald eagle Louisiana has seen a dramatic increase in active nesting territories. An active nesting territory is defined as an area of one or more nests used by a pair of eagles. Since the beginning of the LDWF's surveys, nesting territories have increased from 18 in 1984 to 151 in 2000. This represents 1,632 young eagles fledged from eagle nests since 1984.

The annual aerial bald eagle survey begins in late January after the leaves have fallen from nest trees. This year, however, mild winter weather caused foliage to remain on nest trees making the survey difficult. Nest activity began in December and peaked in January due to the unseasonably warm win-

ter with 69 percent (89) of successful nests fledged by the end of March, 29.5 percent (38) by the end of April and 1.5 percent (2) by the end of May. The final survey was conducted on May 15, 2000 with 151 active nests producing 213 young birds. Each nest is visited at least twice: the first visit in January reveals adults present at the nest; the second visit in the spring documents the young produced. Young birds must be at least eight weeks old to be counted in the production survey because birds eight weeks old generally survive to the 12 week old flight age.

Although 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, other nests also occur throughout the state. They are usually found in tall dominant trees towering above the surrounding forest or swamp, with bald cypress as the preferred tree, but live oak and pine trees are used as well. Nests can be six to eight feet in diameter, constructed of sticks and are used year after year. One nest at White Kitchen, Louisiana has been used for more than 20 years.

The Survey

It takes 16 to 20 hours of flight time to survey nests. A Bell Jet Ranger 206B helicopter is used to survey nests in Louisiana's coastal zone. Loran C navigation equipment was used to map and locate nests in the 1980s and early 1990s, but in 1992 the Department began using Global Positioning System (GPS) equipment. This change in equipment aided in producing precise latitude and longitude coordinates and greatly facilitating nest visitation. Outside the coastal zone nests are surveyed with a Cessna 210 airplane or Cessna 185 floatplane and as a general rule less than 10 nests are surveyed using fixed wing aircraft.

Survey data is compiled by Department biologists and distributed to state and federal agencies, which in turn use the information to regulate development around bald eagle nests. Agencies follow parameters set forth in Management Guidelines for the Bald Eagle in the Southeast Region. 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. Human activities are regulated within a

1,500 foot radius of nest trees from October 1 to May 15.

The bald eagle was "downlisted" from endangered to threatened in the contiguous 48 states on July 12, 1995. USFWS proposed to "delist" the bald eagle in July 2000, which would have removed it from the endangered species list. USFWS did not meet its anticipated goal due to the overflow of public comments on the proposed delisting rule. All comments have been and will continue to be evaluated and the Service is awaiting guidance from the Solicitor's Office on interpretation of regulations pertaining to bald eagle protection under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act.

The recovery of the bald eagle in Louisiana has been tremendous. The rapid population expansion in recent years can be attributed to an overall improvement in Louisiana's environment, habitat protection and the public's increased environmental awareness. ♀

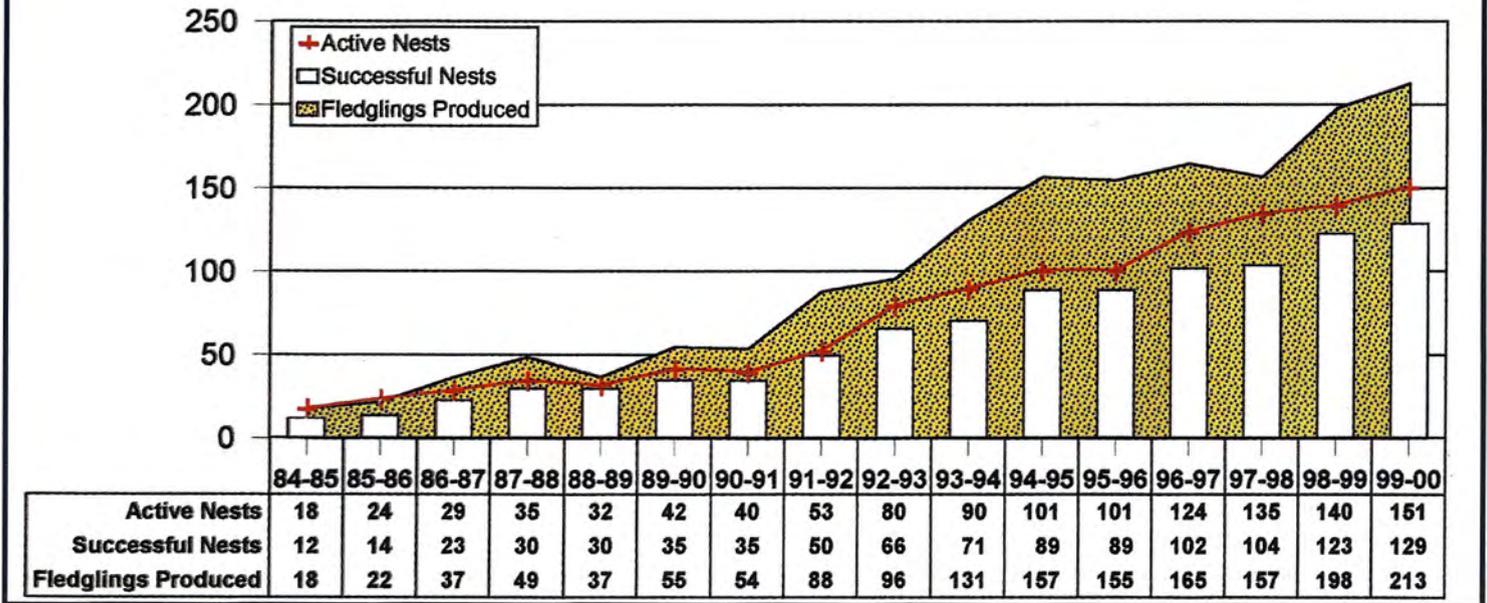
Thomas Hess Jr. is a biologist manager for the LDWF Fur and Refuge Division at Rockefeller Refuge. He has been in charge of the bald eagle program since 1992 and recently has taken over responsibility of the brown pelican program.

The mainstay of the bald eagle's diet is fish. Though ranchers sometimes blame them for taking livestock, it is more likely for eagles to scavenge carcasses killed by wolves or coyotes than take large mammals themselves.

Photo by Lynn Stone



LOUISIANA BALD EAGLE NESTING AND PRODUCTION, 1984-2000



Eagle nests are known as aeries and can be very large. Some are as wide as five feet across and weigh up to two tons.



Photo by Thomas Hess Jr.

Young eaglets spend up to three months in the nest before taking flight. Adult plumage replaces the spotted juvenile plumage shown below after four or five years.



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