

Bald Eagles Make Comeback in South Louisiana

Vernon L. Wright and Tom Hess



Photos by George Melancon

In the early 1900s, bald eagles were common throughout southern Louisiana, but the deleterious effects of DDT on the birds and their eggshells had placed the species on the endangered list by the 1970s. In 1972, only six or seven nesting territories remained in South Louisiana.

Thirty years later, the bald eagle is no longer even on the threatened species list (where it was placed in 1985). It is,

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however, still protected by state and federal laws. Today, possession of a bald eagle, alive or dead, merits a fine of from \$500 to \$20,000 with jail terms of up to two years. Possession of feathers is a crime, also.

The comeback is credited in large part to law enforcement and decreased use of DDT. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries began aerial surveys to monitor nesting birds in 1984 (Figure 1). By 1985, the number of active nests had increased to 18. Today about 150 active nests exist. Most are between the Mississippi River and Vermilion Bay, with Terrebonne Parish topping the list with 54 known nesting sites (Figure 2).

South Louisiana's marshes are attractive to the fish-eating bald eagles, not only because of abundant food, but also because of the prevalence of large cypress trees. Because the eagles add to their large nests each year, nests can reach weights of several hundred pounds and diameters of 10 to 12 feet.

The eagles nest in South Louisiana during the winter, when pair activities include readying the nest and laying eggs. Most egg laying is completed in late November, and the eggs hatch around year's end. By March, most young have left the nest and soon thereafter most of the eagles will leave the state. October signals the

Figure 1. The bald eagle was placed on the threatened species list in 1985. Since then, a concerted effort has been made to bring back the numbers.



