

Bald Eagle

(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)—Threatened

Description

The Bald Eagle is one of the largest birds that occurs in Utah. Its height ranges from 30 to 43 inches and its wingspan is between 7 and 8 feet. Adults are characterized by a white head and tail, chocolate brown wings and body and a massive yellow bill. However, Bald Eagles typically do not attain their full adult plumage (white head and tail) until they are 4 years old or older. Immature Bald Eagles are as large as adults, but have brown heads and tails matching their body color and a black bill. Between the ages of 1 and 4 years, Bald Eagle plumages vary widely, some have mostly white bodies while others have mostly brown bodies; tails and heads also have varying amounts of white or brown. One consistent feature is the presence of white diagonal lines on the upper half of the underwings (only visible in flight). Golden Eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) are similar in size, but have golden feathers on the back of their heads and necks.

Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) differ from Bald Eagles by being smaller and having a dark stripe across their white heads, through the eye; also ospreys, unlike eagles, are often seen hovering over water.

Distribution and Habitat

Very few Bald Eagles nest in Utah; only four nest sites are currently (1997) known. Eagles have nested recently along the Colorado River in Grand County, in a shelter belt in Emery County (all in the Colorado Plateau ecoregion) and along the Jordan River in Salt Lake County (Basin and Range). These eagles build huge stick nests in tall trees, usually cottonwoods or conifers, habitat around the actual nest can vary, but nests are almost always near open water. Eagles feed primarily on fish and waterfowl, but often scavenge dead fish and mammals including rabbits and deer.

While we have very few nesting eagles in Utah, we have thousands of Bald Eagles in Utah during the

winter. Most of these eagles breed in the northern U.S. and Canada, then migrate to Utah where they spend the winter fishing ice-free waters and feeding on dead waterfowl, rabbits and deer. Eagles often congregate in areas of open water to feed; however, they also use a variety of drier foraging habitats from mid-elevation canyons to low elevation valleys and deserts. Winter eagles roost primarily in forested canyons or tall cottonwoods along streams and reservoirs. Several hundred eagles can use a single large roost, but it's more typical to see 10 or 20 eagles in a winter roost. Wintering eagles can be found in each of the Utah Ecoregions, but their numbers and distribution vary with severity of the winter here and farther north.

Life History

Even though pairs often mate for life, courtship displays can often be seen before and during migration in late winter. Courtship displays include elaborate rolling and diving flights, talon locking, and food exchanges between mates. Bald Eagles usually begin nesting in late winter. In Utah, nests are usually constructed in January (by adding materials to an old nest) and eggs are usually laid in February. Both males and females incubate the eggs (usually 2) for 34-36 days. After the eggs hatch (usually in March), both adults take turns protecting the nest and feeding the young. Eaglets can often be seen exercising their wings on the edge of the nest at about 50 days old. They will begin flying at about age 70 days but often remain in the nest area for several months, leaving sometime from June through August. During the late spring and summer months, adults teach their young how to capture prey.



Photo courtesy of U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

It's not known whether the eagles that nest in Utah remain here throughout the winter, but most eagles migrate south during the fall. Eagles that nest north of here usually arrive on their Utah wintering grounds in November. These eagles may remain in Utah from a few to several months, but most have left the state by April or May.

Threats and Reasons for Decline

Bald Eagle population declines resulted from habitat loss, shooting, trapping, and widespread pesticide contamination and pollution. Much of the population decline started in the 19th century and continued through the 1970s. Human disturbance of nesting sites may have also led to reductions in eagle productivity in some areas.

Nationally, Bald Eagle populations have rebounded dramatically since the 1970s when the Bald Eagle Protection Act and the Endangered Species Act were established. The population has recently increased to the point where Bald Eagles are no longer considered Endangered and are now listed as Threatened. The nesting population in Utah has increased, though not as dramatically as in other areas, and the Utah population has still not met the recovery goal of 10 nesting pairs.

Despite their rangewide improvement, Bald Eagles still face threats from habitat loss, environmental contaminants, human disturbance, indiscriminate poisoning and shooting.

Recovery Efforts

A plan outlining the efforts needed to recover Bald Eagles in Utah was published in 1983 (Northern State Bald Eagle Recovery Plan). Ongoing endeavors to recover and monitor the Utah eagle populations include: protection of known nesting sites, annual nest inventory and moni-

toring and development of nest management plans. These efforts involve private landowners, volunteers and state and federal agencies.

The Utah winter population is also sampled annually on standardized routes throughout the state. Winter roost sites are also being identified and mapped, and roost site characteristics are being determined. Public awareness of eagles is being promoted each year through Bald Eagle Day.

Survival of eagles is being increased by reducing mortality on power lines (through constructing raptor-safe power poles), reducing accidental or intentional trapping, shooting and poisoning (through education and prosecution), rehabilitation of sick and injured birds, reduction of lead pellets in the environment (eagles frequently ingest lead pellets from scavenged ducks resulting in lead poisoning), and reduction of disturbance at nest sites. Habitat conservation and management has also increased survival by providing adequate nesting and foraging sites.

How You Can Help

You can help by reporting the location of any **adult** Bald Eagles seen in Utah between **June and September**. Adults seen during this period are likely to have nested here, or they may be looking for suitable nesting habitat. Utah has a large amount of potential Bald Eagle nesting habitat that appears to be unused, and given the rangewide increase in eagles, we would expect to see more eagles nesting in Utah.

If you find an injured eagle, contact your local Utah Division of Wildlife Resources office. They will help recover the bird and find the nearest raptor rehabilitator. If you find a dead eagle or witness a shooting or other illegal activity, contact any state or federal law enforcement office and notify them of its location. You should not pick up a dead eagle since it may have been poisoned.

You can participate in Bald Eagle Day (first Saturday of February) by visiting any one of the eagle viewing sites in the state. Contact your local Division of Wildlife Resources office for a location near you.

Where To Learn More

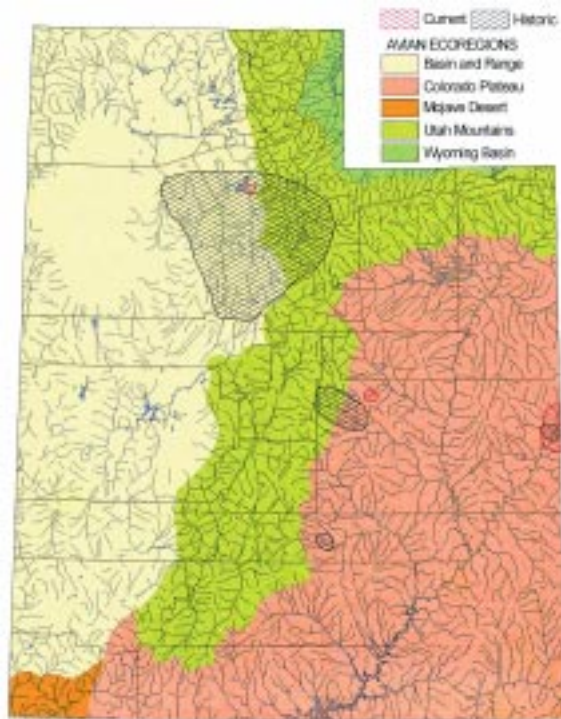
The Utah Division of Wildlife Resources has published a Wildlife Notebook Series (No. 3) featuring the Bald Eagle. Several books on Bald Eagles and raptors are available at bookstores and libraries. These range from technical to general accounts. Other educational materials such as video tapes and CDROMs are available through specialty (nature) bookstores and (wild) bird shops. Web sites can be found by searching for the keywords "Bald Eagles," "eagles," "raptors," and "birds of prey."

For More Information

Nongame Avian Program Coordinator
Utah Division of Wildlife Resources
1594 W. North Temple, Suite 2110
PO Box 146301
Salt Lake City, UT 84114-6301
801-538-4764

or

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Utah Field Office
145 East 1300 South, Suite 404
Salt Lake City, UT 84115
801-524-5001



Bald Eagle distribution.



Bald Eagle habitat in Utah photo courtesy of Bob Walters

References

- Bird, D. M., N. R. Seymour, and J. M. Gerrard. 1983. *Biology and Management of Bald Eagles and Osprey*. Harpell Press, Ste Anne de Bellevue, Quebec, Canada
- Ehrlich, P. R., D. S. Dobkin, and D. Wheye. 1988. *The Birder's Handbook*. Simon and Schuster, Inc., New York, N.Y.
- Grier, J. G., et al. 1983. *Northern States Bald Eagle Recovery Plan*. Fish and Wildlife Reference Service, Denver, Colo. 80205.
- Johnsgard, P. A. 1990. *Hawks, Eagles and Falcons of North America: Biology and Natural History*. Smithsonian Institution Press, Washington, D.C.
- Lincer, J. L., W. S. Clark, and M. N. LeFrance, Jr. 1979. *Working Bibliography of the Bald Eagle*. National Wildlife Federation Scientific and Technical Series 2, National Wildlife Federation, Washington, D.C.
- Palmer, R. S. 1988. *Handbook of North American Birds. Volume 4, Diurnal Raptors, Part 1*. Yale University Press, New Haven, Conn.