

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*



Folk Name: White-headed Sea Eagle, Bird of Washington, Gray Eagle

Status: Resident

Abundance: Rare to Uncommon

Habitat: River corridors, lakes, large ponds, open marsh habitats

The story of the Bald Eagle in America is a tale of natural majesty, triumph, emblematic sovereignty, persecution, sickness, sorrow, perseverance, and, finally, recovery and redemption. The Continental Congress declared this magnificent native eagle our national emblem in 1782, just four years after our victory over the English. Its image was placed on the Great Seal of the United States, American currency, and much more. The Bald Eagle was dubbed the “Bird of Washington,” and it occupies a special place in our history and heritage.

Despite its shining image as the symbol of America, the Bald Eagle was often treated poorly by many citizens. Our national emblem was called a “thief,” “pirate,” “assassin,” and “pest,” and it was accused of everything from stealing lambs and goats, to carrying off babies and even teenagers. Farmers considered them a serious threat to their livestock, and Bald Eagles were regularly shot when they were seen.

Even as people persecuted these birds, they stood in awe of them and admired them. Dozens of anecdotal accounts of the “proud bird of liberty” were published in newspapers in the Central Carolinas during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At this time, Bald Eagles nested only in the Mountain and the Coastal Plain Regions, but migrating Bald Eagles were reported in Rowan, Lincoln, Iredell, Cleveland, Mecklenburg, Cabarrus, Chester, and Anson counties.

Most of these newspaper articles relate how impressed people were with both the size and appearance of these birds. Almost all involve birds that were killed or captured, and many involved claims of extreme size and weight measurements. It bears remembering that stories are often embellished and that the actual identity of some of these birds is unknown as most people of that era may not have been able to distinguish between immature Bald or Golden Eagles, Osprey, and perhaps other species of raptors as well. A few examples of these articles are:

- “A bald eagle is frequently seen around Salisbury.” —*The Weekly Era*, October 8, 1874
- “[He] measured six feet and eleven inches from tip to tip...his claws were large enough to grasp a stick seven inches in length, and his leg just above



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the foot, at the smallest point, was 2 ½ inches in circumference. A large buckshot passed through his leg without breaking it.” —*The Charlotte Democrat*, February 8, 1878

- “Its claws measured 3 ¾ inches in length. It is probably the largest bird of the kind ever killed in this section. In attempting to pitch upon a crane, the [bald] eagle fell in the water, caught the crane and swam to a log in the pond. It weighed 20 pounds and could have easily carried off a two year old child.” —*The Charlotte Observer*, November 30, 1878
- “A few days ago, a genuine bald eagle was seen on the farm of Mr. J. Lafayette Stafford, near Harrisburg. It had caught a lamb and had dragged it into a fence corner, and was eating it when discovered. ...The people about Mr. Stafford’s neighborhood are on the lookout for the reappearance of this bird. They want him dead or alive.” —*The Charlotte News*, October 1, 1890
- A specimen of a Bald Eagle was collected from Concord, Cabarrus County, on April 25, 1899, and was sent to be part of the collections at the North Carolina State Museum.
- “Mr. Cody shot the mammoth bird on the wing while it was carrying off a fat, two month’s old lamb.

It was thought by some that this eagle was 200 years old or more, as a small Indian arrow point was found imbedded in its breast.” —*The Gastonia Gazette*, May 27, 1902

[In point of fact, bird-banding data has confirmed that the longest-living wild Bald Eagle known was 38 years old, which is still quite impressive.]

• “Mason Hood was the local ornithologist, who was exercised over the bagging of the Charlotte eagle and he was grieved that there was not patriotism enough in all of the city to produce five dollars with which the bird could have been mounted and presented to the Carnegie library.” —*The Charlotte Observer*, April 26, 1922

By the 1920s, attitudes had begun to change and there was a growing awareness of the importance of predators and the need for conservation. An editorial titled “Spare the Eagle” was run in *The Charlotte Observer* in 1922:

The Charleston News and Courier thinks there should be a Nation-wide effort to stop the killing of eagles. This nation has chosen the bald eagle as its emblem and yet, instead of protecting and preserving it, we treat it as though it were an enemy and a pest and slaughter every eagle that we can get at. “The bird is already so rare in most parts of the country,” says The News and Courier, “that the appearance of an eagle causes a flutter of excitement throughout the whole district, while the killing of one is regarded as a great event, news of which is sent out over the wires to newspapers hundreds of miles distant. This is a shabby way to treat the National bird, whose scream is supposed to make America’s enemies tremble. If we keep it up much longer that scream will never be heard any more, for the American eagle will be as extinct as the dodo.”

It took almost another 20 years before action was actually taken to protect eagles. In 1940, in response to continued shooting of the Bald Eagle, Congress enacted “The Bald Eagle Protection Act.” This was the first attempt to protect our national symbol from continued harm. Unfortunately, the law lacked “teeth,” and actual enforcement was a problem.

Soon the Bald Eagle faced an additional and potentially even more serious threat. This grand bird became a poster child for man’s environmental negligence. The buildup of the chemical insecticide DDT in the environment led to a nationwide population crash of many raptors, including the Bald Eagle. In the 1960s, residue analyses conducted by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service documented the accumulation of DDT in the liver, muscle, and egg shells of the Bald Eagle. In the Carolinas, the breeding population declined dramatically from 1950 to 1970 due primarily to impacts from DDT and related pesticides and also to indiscriminate shooting, disturbance of nesting birds, and habitat loss and degradation.

An outpouring of concern and sorrow about a possible “Doomsday for the Bald Eagle” was a topic of active national discussion. In 1970, South Carolina ornithologist Milby Burton wrote “There are many who think that it will become extinct unless drastic actions are taken to save it.” The Bald Eagle Protection Act was amended in 1962 to include the Golden Eagle, and stiff penalties were finally added to this law in 1972 to help provide additional protection.

A survey conducted in 1973 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service found only 627 active nests in the lower 48 states. No active Bald Eagle nests were found in North Carolina, and only two nests were found in South Carolina. Of those two nests, only a single chick hatched. In the 1970s, the sale of DDT was banned, and an interstate team of experts began working on the protection of existing nests in the Southeast. In 1979, a national survey conducted by the National Wildlife Federation estimated a grand total of 5,000 eagles in the lower 48 states—a total of six Bald



Immature Bald Eagle over Lake Norman. (Jeff Lemons)



Bald Eagle with nesting material. (Jeff Lemons)

Eagles, four adults and two immature birds, were found in North Carolina.

In the 1980s, Bald Eagle populations began to slowly recover in both Carolinas. In 1981, the South Carolina Wildlife and Marine Resources Department estimated 18 breeding pairs in the state, and about 85 nests were tallied 11 years later. The first “post-DDT” era nest in North Carolina was found in 1984 at Lake Mattamuskeet. “Excellent” numbers of post-breeding eagles dispersing from southern nest sites were seen in both Carolinas in the summer of 1985, but they were all considered to be non-breeders. As late as 1988, there were still only three active nests known in North Carolina. However, a “major post-breeding concentration of eagles was reported from the Wateree River just below the Wateree dam in Kershaw County, S.C.” and 17 nests were counted there in 1987. During the winter of 1989–1990, biologists from NC State University documented the first nest attempt by Bald Eagles in the North Carolina Piedmont in Wake County.

The recovery of Bald Eagle population in the Carolinas has steadily continued since that time. Breeding on large lakes in the Piedmont has increased. The Bald Eagle was downlisted from Endangered to Threatened at the federal level in 1995 and then in North Carolina around 2003. Finally, in 2007, the federal government delisted the Bald Eagle, removing it entirely from the federal Endangered Species list.

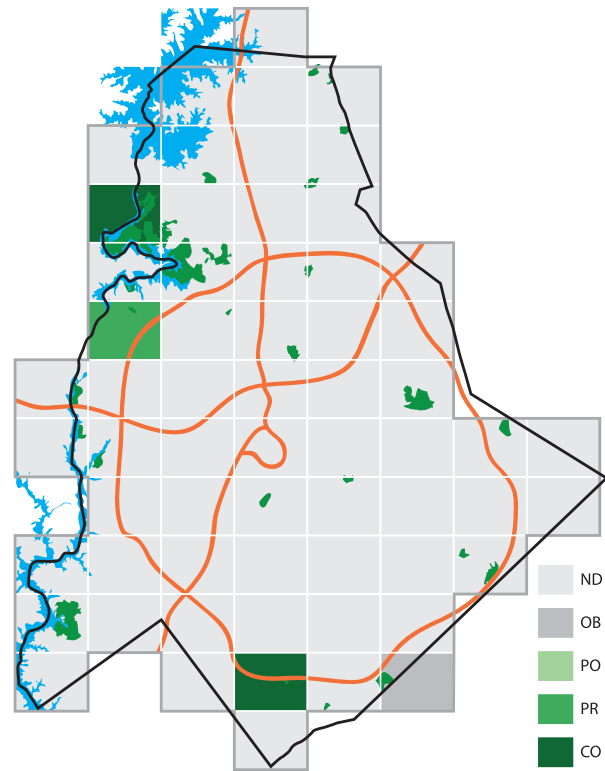
Today, mid-winter eagle surveys are conducted annually, and there are hundreds of nests across the Carolinas. Four decades of hard work and perseverance by the American people on behalf of their national symbol has resulted in successful breeding across the continent. In the Central Carolinas, nests have been found along the Yadkin-Pee Dee River basin (Cabarrus, Rowan, Stanly, and Anson), and nests have been documented along the Catawba River basin from Lake Wateree north to Lake James in the foothills (Catawba, Lincoln, Gaston, Mecklenburg, Union County, NC, Chester, Lancaster, and Kershaw). Nests have also been reported on several large and small lakes and reservoirs.

The Bald Eagle is rare resident bird over most of the Carolina Piedmont, but in some areas it is more common. Individuals are now present in the Central Carolinas every month of the year. Migrants increase our local numbers each fall, and groups of 20 or more eagles have been tallied in a single day in this region in late September.

Dwayne Martin tallied 12 in 2 ½ hours at the Riverbend Park Hawk Watch on October 12, 2015, and had over 73 Bald Eagles migrating over the park in Catawba County between mid-September and mid-October 2015.

Nesting begins in December and January. Nests of the Bald Eagle can become a massive structure. They are usually situated in the tops of tall trees overlooking large expanses of water. They are made of sticks and are often built up and used year after year. The largest bird nest ever documented in the United States was a Bald Eagle nest that was 3 meters in diameter and 6 meters tall and was estimated to weigh more than 1 ton.

Volunteers with the Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas confirmed nesting at a total of three sites in two survey blocks: Cowan’s Ford Wildlife Refuge, Piper Glen Golf Course, and Four Mile Creek Greenway. Fledglings were observed “branching” on 16 April, and their last day at their nest was 22 June.



Mecklenburg County Breeding Bird Atlas:
Very Local (PR/1, CO/2)