



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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BALD EAGLE RETURNING FROM NEAR EXTINCTION; CELEBRATED AS "HOPE" TAKES WING

America's efforts to save endangered species reached an important milestone today with the announcement by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that the bald eagle has recovered sufficiently to change its status from "endangered" to "threatened" in most of the nation.

"All Americans can take pride in the eagle's recovery, because it represents a fulfillment of our nation's commitment to protect its wild heritage," said Service Director Mollie Beattie.

In ceremonies at Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge in Maryland, Beattie marked the occasion by releasing to the wild a 10-pound adult female bald eagle nicknamed "Hope." The eagle had been rehabilitated at the Baltimore Zoo and Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research in Newark, Delaware, after suffering a broken wing.

"With the release of this bird, we rejoice in the recovery of not just this eagle, but the recovery of bald eagle populations in most of the nation," Beattie said. "The recovery of this species is a great success story. This Independence Day we will have additional reason to celebrate with the return of the bird that symbolizes our country's freedom and fierce pride."

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Hope's release today came as the Service made public a proposal to change the status of the nation's symbol from "endangered" to the less dire category of "threatened" throughout the lower 48 states, except in the Southwest.

Bald eagle numbers in the lower 48 states have climbed from about 417 nesting pairs in 1963 to more than 4,000 pairs of adult birds in 1993. In addition, biologists estimate there are 5,000 to 6,000 juvenile bald eagles in the lower 48.

Beattie said that a cleaner environment, habitat protection, strict law enforcement, active management, and public awareness all have contributed to the return of the bald eagle.

"The eagle's recovery is a tribute to the success of the Endangered Species Act and other conservation laws, and to the selfless efforts of the many, many people who have worked so hard to bring the eagle back from the brink of extinction," Beattie said.

Currently, eagles are listed as endangered in 43 states and as threatened in Minnesota, Michigan, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin. The Service's proposal would reclassify the eagle to "threatened" throughout the lower 48, except in Arizona, New Mexico, western Texas, and a small portion of southeastern California where it would remain listed as endangered. Under the Endangered Species Act, an "endangered" species is one that is likely to become extinct, while a "threatened" species is one likely to become endangered. Eagle populations in Alaska are considered healthy and are not listed as endangered or threatened.

The Service is proposing to retain the "threatened" classification for bald eagles because the species, while greatly improved, is not considered fully recovered. Concerns remain about contaminant problems in the Great Lakes region and for Southwestern bald eagles, which will continue to be listed as endangered. A threatened designation more accurately reflects the species' improving status, but does not remove the protections afforded the bald eagle under the Endangered Species Act. The eagle is also protected under the Eagle Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, as well as under various state laws. Its status under those statutes would not be affected by the Service's proposal.

Bald eagles in the southwestern United States would remain designated as endangered under the Service's proposal because the eagle population in that region is small (about 30 nesting pairs), isolated from other populations, and is still vulnerable to natural or human-caused catastrophic events.

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Historically, bald eagles nested throughout most of North America, including 45 of the lower 48 states. But by 1940, habitat loss and uncontrolled shooting prompted Congress to pass the Eagle Protection Act, which prohibited killing or selling bald eagles. Eagles continued to decline, however, as widespread use of DDT after World War II caused reproductive failure among eagles and other bird species. The bald eagle was declared endangered in 1967 when Congress passed the first Endangered Species Act.

Recovery activities for the bald eagle have included securing suitable habitat and reintroducing eagles into unoccupied habitat. Many states have reestablished nesting populations by translocating young eagles from areas where populations are healthy, raising them, and releasing them to the wild. When mature, these eagles return to the release site to nest. These ongoing programs, many of them funded through Section 6 of the Endangered Species Act, coupled with the 1972 ban on DDT, have helped boost eagle numbers in much of the species' range. Protection of eagle nest areas and vigorous law enforcement and public awareness campaigns to reduce illegal shooting of eagles also have contributed. Many private groups have dedicated themselves to rehabilitating injured eagles so that they can be released to the wild again.

Female bald eagles generally weigh up to 14 pounds and have a wingspan of up to 8 feet. Males are smaller, weighing 7 to 10 pounds with a wingspan of 6-1/2 feet. The distinctive white head and tail feathers appear only after the bird is 4 to 5 years old.

Eagles are believed to live 30 years in the wild and longer in captivity. They mate for life and build huge nests in the tops of large trees. Bald eagles lay two or three eggs once a year, which hatch after about 35 days. Once they have left the nest, young eagles may range over great distances but usually return to nest within 100 miles of where they were raised.

Participants in today's ceremony included Dr. Torrey Brown, Secretary of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources; Michael Bean, Senior Attorney, Environmental Defense Fund; Bill Howard, Executive Vice President, National Wildlife Federation; Dr. Sallie Welte, Tri-State Bird Rescue and Research; and Darwin Wika, Manager of Environmental Stewardship, Dupont Corporation.

The Service's proposal will be published soon in the Federal Register, followed by a 90-day public comment period. A final decision on the proposal will be made by the Service within one year. To submit comments, write to: Chief, Division of Endangered Species, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bishop Henry Whipple Federal Building, One Federal Drive, Fort Snelling, Minnesota, 55111-4056.