



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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BALD EAGLE SOARS AGAIN! POPULATION INCREASES SHIFT NATIONAL SYMBOL TO LESS CRITICAL STATUS

The American bald eagle, the national symbol that disappeared from the continental United States just 25 years ago, is back from the brink.

After a year-long review of public comments and scientific information, the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today took the final official steps to change the status of the majestic raptor from "endangered" to the less critical category of "threatened" throughout the lower 48 states.

The final action goes further than the original proposal, which would have retained the bird's endangered status in Arizona, New Mexico, western Texas, and a small section of southeastern California. A thorough review of scientific data revealed the bird could be downlisted in those areas as well.

The decision marks a dramatic turnaround for the eagle, which was down to as few as 417 nesting pairs in the continental United States in the 1960s because of loss of habitat and widespread use of harmful pesticides. Since then, the number of nesting pairs has climbed to nearly 4,500.

"The bald eagle is a testimony to what Americans can do to conserve wildlife and our natural heritage," said Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt. "The national symbol now stands as living proof that we are not doomed to watch wildlife disappear, species by species, until we again face a Silent Spring."

"Through landmark laws such as the Endangered Species Act and the Clean Water Act, we have proven we can conserve and restore vital habitat needed by species such as the bald eagle. We can rid our environment of harmful pollutants that kill wildlife and harm humans. And we can ensure future generations have a healthy and beautiful world to enjoy."

The decline of the bald eagle was primarily caused by the pesticide DDT and destruction of its habitat. Eagles ingested DDT by eating contaminated fish. The pesticide caused the shells

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of the bird's eggs to thin and resulted in nesting failures. In 1972, DDT was banned and bald eagle reproductive success gradually began to increase.

In addition, the 1973 Endangered Species Act curbed habitat destruction that had diminished eagle nesting areas and promoted eagle recovery actions such as releasing healthy young eagles in states where natural reproduction no longer occurred.

"While banning DDT was vital," U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Mollie Beattie said, "the eagle could not have recovered had there not been strong laws such as the Endangered Species Act to protect its habitat and promote recovery."

"Even as we celebrate the recovery of the bald eagle, there are hundreds of other species that currently are where the eagle was in 1960," she said. "If the American people are not vigilant in our commitment to our environment and to strong conservation laws, as we were with the eagle, we will lose those species and the richness of our natural heritage."

Since the late 1970s, bald eagle populations have been doubling every 6 to 7 years. Surveys indicate the population has risen 10 percent since 1993. The species is not listed as threatened or endangered in Alaska or Canada because populations there are healthy.

Under the act, a plant or animal is listed as "endangered" when it is on the brink of extinction. A "threatened" listing means a species could become endangered in the foreseeable future but is not currently considered endangered.

The bald eagle is a large, powerful, brown bird with a white head and tail. Females generally weigh up to 14 pounds and have a wingspan up to 8 feet. Males are smaller, weighing 7 to 10 pounds with a wingspan of 6-1/2 feet. Young bald eagles are mostly dark brown until they reach 4 to 6 years of age and may be confused with the golden eagle. The bird's lifespan in the wild can reach 30 years.

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

The bird historically ranged throughout North America except extreme northern Alaska and Canada and central and southern Mexico. It nests on both coasts from Florida to Baja California

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in the south, and from Labrador to the western Aleutian Islands of Alaska in the north.

The bald eagle's habitat includes estuaries, large lakes, reservoirs, major rivers, and some seacoast areas. These areas, however, must have an adequate food base, perching areas, and nesting sites meeting certain requirements in order to support the species.

In winter, bald eagles often congregate at specific wintering sites that are generally close to open water and offer good perch trees and night roosts.

When Europeans first arrived on the North American continent, there were an estimated one-quarter to one-half million bald eagles. The first major decline in the bald eagle population probably began in the mid- to late 1800s. It coincided with declines in numbers of waterfowl and shorebirds and other major prey species. Many eagles were killed by humans. Coupled with loss of nesting habitat, these factors reduced bald eagle populations until the 1940s.

In 1940, Congress passed the Bald Eagle Protection Act, prohibiting killing or selling of bald eagles. The act increased public awareness of the bald eagle and populations stabilized or increased in most areas of the country.

Shortly after World War II, however, the use of DDT and other organochlorine compounds became widespread. Initially, DDT was sprayed extensively along coastal and other wetland areas to control mosquitos. Later it was used as a general insecticide.

As DDT accumulated in individual bald eagles from ingesting contaminated food, the species' reproduction success plummeted. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service researchers at the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center linked DDT with the thinning of egg shells.

In 1967, the Secretary of the Interior listed bald eagles south of the 40th parallel as endangered under the Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966. The northern bald eagle was not included in that action.

Following passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973, a survey revealed bald eagle populations and reproductive success were lower in northern states than in certain southern areas. Therefore, in 1978, the Service listed the eagle throughout the lower 48 states as endangered except in Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin where it was designated as threatened.

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The Service proposed downlisting the eagle to threatened on July 12, 1994. The proposed rule recommended reclassification for all bald eagles except those in areas of the Southwest. Two public hearings were held in response to public requests.

On March 23, 1995, the public comment period was reopened to alert the public to the Service's intention to include eagles from the Southwestern areas in the reclassification.

The new threatened status for all bald eagles of the lower 48 states will become effective 30 days after publication of a final rule in the Federal Register.

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