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Wild Side BALD EAGLE

By **LYNETTE RAE McADAMS**
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Native only to North America, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is found throughout Alaska and Canada as well as in scattered locations across the contiguous United States and Mexico.

The largest true raptor on the continent, it boasts a wingspan up to 8 feet in length and weighs an impressive 14 pounds. With a preference for residing near large, open bodies of water, where the fishing is

good and the weather mild, this famous bird of prey feels right at home along our coastline, where it is a common and welcome sight year-round.

Easily identifiable by its distinctive brown body and snowy-white head and tail feathers, this precision predator flies through the air at 35 mph, making vertical dives at up to three times that speed when on the hunt for food. Rather than flapping its wings for propulsion, it soars on thermal vectors generated by solar air currents, thereby



A bald eagle soars over the beach at Fort Stevens State Park.

using only one-twentieth the energy required to pump its enormous wings.

In the wild, bald eagles have an average lifespan of about 30 years. At sexual maturity, they pair off with mates who become lifelong



PHOTO BY HUGH MCKENNA

partners, sharing almost equally in the tasks of nest-building, egg-hatching and chick-rearing.

Typically, each nesting pair has one chick per year, but sometimes two and, very rarely, three. As a species,

H. leucocephalus is prone to siblicide, so if multiple chicks do hatch, they compete fiercely against one another, with the dominant chick often starving the weaker one, or simply tossing it from the nest.

Used by the same mating pair from year to year, who add to it and make small renovations each spring, bald eagles construct some of the largest nests in the world, building entirely with sticks and then lining the inside with soft grasses and moss. The biggest nest ever found, located in St. Petersburg, Florida, was almost 10 feet in diameter, 20 feet deep, and weighed close to 4,000 pounds.

Owing to its beauty, strength, longevity and native birthplace, the bald eagle became the official bird of the U.S. in 1782. At that time, it was estimated that almost 500,000 specimens lived in North America. Prized by some and considered vermin by others, they were heavily hunted. By the late 1800s, the species was



PHOTO BY HSTIVER (THINKSTOCK.COM)

A portrait of a bald eagle

in decline.

In 1940, the Bald Eagle Act was passed, and under federal protection, populations started to recover. Simultaneously, however, pesticides were introduced for use in agriculture, entering the food chain at the lowest level. The toxic compounds, especially Dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane (DDT), made eagle eggshells so brittle, they would break during incubation. By 1963, continental populations had fallen to 417 nesting pairs.

A ban on DDT in 1972 saw eagle numbers rise almost immediately and continue through the following decades — so much so that, in 2007, the bird was safely removed from the Endangered Species List.

But make no mistake: Bald eagles are still heavily protected. Under federal law, it remains illegal to possess any part of the bird, dead or alive, including feathers, eggs and nest materials. Exceptions are made for Native Americans, who, with special permit, are allowed to use the emblems for cultural ceremonies. All others, if caught, face fines of up to \$100,000, as well as possible imprisonment. **CW**



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