



flying high with
EAGLES

Though there are only two species in North America, eagles have won the hearts of birders everywhere.

By David Shaw, Fairbanks, Alaska

Adult bald eagles perched high on a limb

I was 12, and bouncing in nearly ecstatic excitement in the seat of the bright-yellow school bus. The kids around me looked out the windows with mild interest, but I could hardly contain myself.

The winter oaks, bare of any leaves, allowed passing views of the gray water of the Susquehanna River. At what seemed a snail's pace, the bus pulled into the parking lot of the Conowingo Dam in northeastern Maryland. The driver shut down the engine with a sputter and, dreadfully slowly, finally opened up the folding doors.

I bolted, flew up the bus aisle as though I were on wings, and bounded down the short steps to the asphalt below. "David! Wait!" called an adult from behind me. Ignoring the shout, I ran to the fence overlooking the river, my father's oversized binoculars bouncing dangerously around my neck. And there, just above me in the trees, was a bald eagle. No, wait—two, three, five, 10—too many to count. They were everywhere.

The winter sunlight filtering through the overcast sky lit up the white heads and tails of the adult birds and the scruffy mottled browns of the juveniles. They were huge, enormous, great hulking birds, eyeing the outflow of the dam with alert yellow eyes, waiting patiently for a fish to rise. For the first time since we'd left home that morning, I was speechless and still.

I've seen thousands of bald eagles since that day, from wintering birds in the wetlands of the Great Plains to congregations of hundreds around salmon streams in Alaska. I've watched them scrounge for garbage in city dumps, and delicately lift fish from lakes that looked like something on a postcard.

The diversity of places where bald eagles occur says something about the species. They are flexible—as happy

eking out a living on what humans throw away as they are devouring fresh salmon from a wild river.

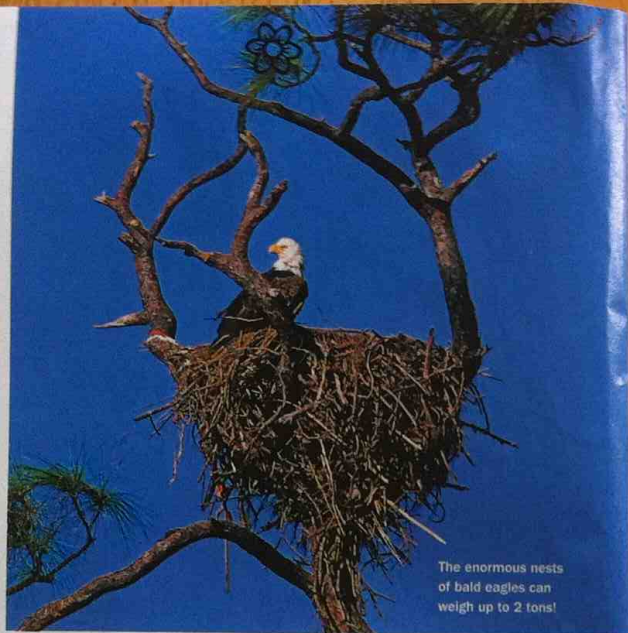
Bald eagles are found across North America in every state except Hawaii, almost always near water. Fish are an important part of their diet, but they are more often scavengers, eating carcasses, refuse or anything else into which they can sink their great yellow beaks.

This isn't to say they're not capable hunters. Bald eagles will happily catch mice, rabbits, waterfowl, hares, seabirds, other raptors and even, on rare occasions, household pets. But their bread and butter comes in less attractive packaging.

Making a Comeback

Bald eagles nest exclusively off the ground, in trees or human-made structures. They build huge stick nests that a pair will use year after year to raise one to three chicks. The chicks, after fledging, take five years to fully mature, passing through a variety of plumages to reach the characteristic snow-white head and tail of the adults.

Though now abundant across most of their range, it was not so long ago that pesticide poisoning and persecution by humans hit bald eagles hard. Throughout the 19th century and



The enormous nests of bald eagles can weigh up to 2 tons!

the first half of the 20th, eagles were killed out of a misguided perception that they were competitors for fish and game. Then, in the mid-1900s, bald eagles took a second, even harder hit with the introduction of DDT to the environment.

By the mid-1960s there were fewer than 500 breeding pairs in all of the lower 48 states. Gradually, as the cause of their decline became

known and they became protected under the 1973 Endangered Species Act, they began to recover. Hunted and poisoned almost to extinction, the bald eagle now thrives over most of its former range. On June 29, 2007, the bald eagle was removed from the Endangered Species List, one of the major conservation victories of the past century.

Golden Touch

It was not until some years after my first encounter with bald eagles on the Susquehanna that I came into a new kind of awe of the golden eagle, the great avian predator of the Western mountains and deserts.

The first time I saw golden eagles it was as two distant spots through a pair of binoculars over the cliffs and sagebrush of the Snake River Birds of Prey area in Idaho.

In this area, as in most of their range, the eagles nest on cliff faces offering dramatic views of the surrounding landscape. Those two birds, soaring on an updraft, were too far

away for me to appreciate in any real sense. That came later.

Golden eagles are as large as bald eagles but far more powerful. They fly with purpose, soaring in thermals and updrafts, carried high above the mountainous landscapes they call home.

Unlike bald eagles, golden eagles are not limited to North America. Their range extends across the three continents of the Northern Hemisphere. On ours, they occur mostly in the West and North. Migratory across the northern end of their range, they arrive in the early spring when the landscape is still covered in snow.

In Alaska, where I now live, they are harbingers of spring. Among the first migratory birds to arrive in the Alaska Range, they're eagerly awaited by birders and biologists alike.

Golden eagles avoided much of the havoc wrought by DDT, but that isn't to say they haven't suffered at the hands of humans. Even today, they are trapped and poisoned, usually accidentally, through much of the American West.

Filled With Passion

Golden eagles, while superficially similar to balds, are markedly different in power, prey and—dare I say?—passion. Their massive feet and talons can handle prey up to the size of deer, mountain sheep and caribou calves, though they only occasionally will take on such difficult prey. More often they feed on rabbits, hares, ground squirrels and a variety of birds up to the size of cranes and geese.

I mentioned passion because there is just something about golden eagles. Perhaps it has to do with where they live: the sweeping deserts of the Southwest, the peaks of the Rockies and the glacier-clad mountains of Alaska. Or perhaps it is their size, speed, agility, grace and guts that make them seem so extraordinary and enduring.



GOLDEN BEAUTY. Like bald eagles, it might take golden eagles a few years to fully develop the coloring on their heads. Below are two juveniles (left) with an adult.



quick facts

EAGLES OF NORTH AMERICA

- Only two of the world's 61 eagle species occur in North America.
- Bald eagles occur across the continent, mostly near water.
- Golden eagles live primarily in the West and North.
- Both species take five years to reach maturity.
- Subadult eagles (younger than 5 years) of both species can be age-identified by plumage characteristics.
- The bald eagle, the national symbol of the United States, was once threatened with extinction but is now recovering.