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News Release



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The Bald Eagle Is Back! President Clinton Announces Proposal to Remove Our National Symbol From Endangered Species List

As a symbol of freedom, strength, and courage, the bald eagle represents the best of what America has to offer. On the eve of Independence Day weekend, President Clinton marked the culmination of a three-decade effort to protect and recover this majestic bird by announcing a proposal to remove it from the list of threatened and endangered species.

"The American bald eagle is now back from the brink of extinction, thriving in virtually every state of the union," President Clinton said. "I can think of no better way to honor the birth of our nation than by celebrating the rebirth of our proudest living symbol."

The bald eagle once ranged throughout every state in the Union except Hawaii. When America adopted the bird as its national symbol in 1782, as many as 100,000 nesting bald eagles lived in the continental United States, excluding Alaska. By 1963, only 417 nesting pairs were found in the lower 48.

Today, due to recovery efforts by the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in partnership with other federal agencies, tribes, state and local governments, conservation organizations, universities, corporations and thousands of individual Americans, this number has risen to an estimated 5,748 nesting pairs. As a result, biologists believe it may no longer require the special protection of the Endangered Species Act.

"America was the first nation on earth to pass a comprehensive law protecting endangered species, the Endangered Species Act, and once again we have shown that this landmark law works," Interior Department Secretary Bruce Babbitt said. "Today the American bald eagle is back. The bald eagle joins a growing list of other once-imperilled species that are on the road to recovery, including the peregrine falcon and the Columbian white-tailed deer."

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 four to six years of age and may be confused with the golden eagle. The bird's life span in the wild can reach 30 years.

Bald eagles mate for life and build huge nests in the tops of large trees near rivers, lakes and marshes. Nests, which are usually re-used and enlarged every year, can reach 20 feet across and weigh up to 4,000 pounds. The birds travel over great distances, but normally return to nest within 100 miles of where they were originally raised.

Bald eagles historically ranged throughout North America except extreme northern Alaska and Canada and central and southern Mexico. They nested on both coasts from Florida to Baja California in the south, and from Labrador to the western Aleutian Islands, Alaska in the north. The raptors' 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 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 1800's. 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 1940's.

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 pesticides became widespread. Initially, DDT was sprayed extensively along coastal and other wetland areas to control mosquitos. Later it was used as a general insecticide. Eagles ingested DDT by eating contaminated fish. The pesticide caused the shells of the bird's eggs to thin and resulted in nesting failures. Loss of nesting habitat also contributed to the population decline.

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. In 1972, the Environmental Protection Agency took the historic and, at the time, controversial step of banning the use of DDT in the United States. This was the first step on the road to recovery for the bald eagle.

Following enactment of the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service listed the species as endangered throughout the lower 48 states, except in Michigan, Minnesota, Oregon, Washington, and Wisconsin where it was designated as threatened. The species was never listed as threatened or endangered in Alaska or Canada because populations there have always been healthy.

The listing of the species as endangered provided the springboard for the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and its partners to accelerate the pace of recovery through captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts, law enforcement and the protection of nest sites during the breeding season.

"It is fitting that we close out this century with such a great tribute to America's commitment to conserving our natural heritage," Babbitt said. "Generations to come will not just see bald eagles on our

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"THE BALD EAGLE IS BACK"

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