



All About the Bald Eagle

The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is one of North America's most recognizable birds and has served as the national symbol of the United States since 1782.

Despite its name, the bald eagle is not actually bald. The word "bald" comes from an old English term meaning "white-headed," describing the brilliant white feathers that develop on the heads and tails of adults at about four to five years of age. Before reaching adulthood, young eagles are mostly dark brown with mottled white feathers making them look very different from their parents.

Bald eagles are among the largest birds of prey in North America. They have wingspans ranging from six to eight feet and weigh between 6 and 14 pounds and the females are typically larger than males. Their powerful hooked beaks and sharp talons are designed for catching and holding prey and their eyesight is estimated to be four to five times sharper than a human's. Eagles spend much of their time soaring on rising air currents, searching for food or surveying their territory.

Fish make up the majority of a bald eagle's diet, which is why they are most often found near rivers, lakes, reservoir and coastal waters. They also eat ducks, small mammals, reptiles and carrion. Because they rely on healthy fish populations and clean waterways, bald eagles are considered an important indicator of ecosystem health. When rivers are clean and forests remain intact, eagles have the resources they need to survive and raise their young.

Bald eagles build massive nests high in large trees near water. These nests are used year after year, with each breeding season adding new sticks and nesting material. Some nests become more than eight feet across, over 13 feet deep, and can weigh more than a ton, making them the largest tree nests of any bird in North America.

Eagles usually mate for life and typically raise one to three eaglets each year, with both parents sharing the responsibilities of incubating the eggs and feeding the young.



The bald eagle nearly disappeared from the lower 48 states during the mid-1900s because of habitat loss, illegal hunting, and the pesticide DDT, which weakened eggshells and prevented many chicks from hatching. By the early 1970s, Virginia had only about 30 known breeding pairs, and populations across North Carolina had also declined dramatically. After DDT was banned, the species received federal protection, waterways became cleaner, and nesting habitat was preserved, allowing bald eagle populations to recover. Today, the bald eagle is considered one of the greatest wildlife conservation success stories in American history.



Virginia now supports one of the largest breeding populations of bald eagles in the eastern United States, with nesting pairs found throughout the Commonwealth, not just along the Chesapeake Bay but also in the Piedmont and mountain regions. In North Carolina, bald eagles are found statewide wherever suitable habitat exists, including reservoirs, major rivers, sounds, and lakes. Their continued expansion into inland waters reflects the improving health of many watersheds across both states.

The Dan River Basin has become an increasingly important part of this recovery story. Flowing through both Virginia and North Carolina, the Dan River and its tributaries (including the Smith, Mayo, Banister, Sandy and Hyco rivers) provide the clean water, abundant fish, mature forests and quiet nesting habitat that bald eagles need to thrive. Sightings of bald eagles have become much more common throughout the basin in recent years, and nesting pairs have returned to areas where they had not been seen for generations. Their presence is a visible reminder that protecting rivers, forests, and wildlife habitat benefits not only eagles but also the countless other species and communities that depend on a healthy watershed.

For DRBA, the bald eagle is more than a national emblem. It is a symbol of hope, resilience and the power of long-term stewardship. Every eagle seen soaring above the Dan River Basin is proof that when people invest in clean water and thriving habitats, nature can recover and our community is a healthy place to live, work and play.

You can help keep that story soaring by supporting DRBA's Soaring Summer Campaign with a [donation](#), exploring the rivers and trails that make our watershed on our [Interactive Map](#), signing up for [volunteer alerts](#) to lend a hand and making choices every day that protect clean water and healthy habitats (have you taken the [Clean Water Pledge](#) yet?)



Together we can help keep bald eagles soaring above the Dan River Basin and preserve a watershed where clean water, healthy habitats and vibrant communities are protected and preserved for generations to come.

Thank you for caring!