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Birds



Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

Monitored since the 1980s, when the bald eagle was placed on the federal list of threatened species, Yellowstone's population of bald eagles is relatively stable. In 2007, it was removed from the federal threatened species list, and monitoring continues. Each year, 40 to 60 percent of nests succeed (produce eggs), with each successful nest producing an average of 1.42 eaglets. These statistics are slightly lower than expected for a stable and healthy population, and may be explained by the park's harsh environment, especially during the early breeding season (February–April), and the declining cutthroat trout population in Yellowstone Lake. (See *Chapter 8*.)

Identification

- Large, dark bird; adult (four or five years old) has completely white head and tail.
- Females larger than males, as is true with most predatory birds.
- Immature bald eagles show varying amounts of white; they can be mistaken for golden eagles.

Habitat

Habitat can be a clue to which eagle you are seeing:

- Bald eagles are usually near water where they feed on fish and waterfowl.
- Golden eagles hunt in open country for rabbits and other small mammals.
- Exception: Both feed on carcasses in the winter, sometimes together.

Behavior

- Bald eagles nest in large trees close to water.
- In severe winters, eagles may move to lower elevations such as Paradise Valley, north of the park, where food is more available. On these wintering areas,

resident eagles may be joined by migrant bald eagles and golden eagles.

- Feed primarily on fish and waterfowl, except in winter.
- In winter, when fish stay deeper in water, they eat more waterfowl.
- Eat carrion in winter if it is readily available.
- Form long-term pair bonds.
- Some remain on their territories year-round, while others return to their nesting sites by late winter.
- Two to three eggs (usually two) laid from February to mid-April.
- Both adults incubate the eggs, which hatch in 34 to 36 days.
- At birth, eaglets are immobile, downy, have their eyes open, and are completely dependent upon their parents for food.
- When 10–14 weeks old, they can fly from the nest.
- Some young migrate in fall to western Oregon and Washington.
- Many adults stay in the park year-round.

2010 Status

- Some eagle territories are experiencing nest instability due to large numbers of trees that are falling as a result of the 1988 fires.
- In 2010, 18 pairs of eagles nested in the park; 9 of these pairs raised 12 young.
- Although the population is relatively stable parkwide, few of the nests in the Yellowstone Lake area succeeded.
- Bald eagles, like osprey, are among the fish-eating wildlife being monitored to determine any effect from the declining cutthroat trout population. (See *Chapter 8*.)