

# Virginia Bald Eagle Population Soars

## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

17 July, 2001

For more information contact  
Dr. Bryan Watts, Director  
Center for Conservation Biology  
College of William and Mary  
[bdwatt@wm.edu](mailto:bdwatt@wm.edu)  
(757) 221-2247

## **NEWS BRIEF**

Once reduced to just over 30 breeding pairs in the Virginia, Bald Eagles continue to make a tremendous recovery. For the 25<sup>th</sup> consecutive year, The Center for Conservation at the College of William and Mary with funding from the Virginia Department of Game & Inland Fisheries has completed the annual population and productivity survey. The survey resulted in a record 331 breeding pairs for the state. This value represents a 18.2% increase from the 280 breeding pairs documented during the 2000 survey. The breeding population produced a record 466 young.

## **BACKGROUND**

Historically, the bald eagle was a common species along major river systems, lakes and coastal areas throughout Virginia. The widespread use of persistent pesticides for crop management in the region resulted in a dramatic population decline over a 30-40 year period. By the late 1960's, the Virginia breeding population had been decimated by eggshell thinning and associated low productivity. Concern for populations across North America prompted the elevation of the bald eagle to the federal list of endangered species and led to a national effort to restore historic populations. Since the nationwide ban on most persistent pesticides in 1972, the Virginia population has experienced a dramatic recovery. The number of breeding pairs has increased from an estimated low of approximately 32 pairs in the 1960's to 331 pairs in 2001.

Beginning in 1977, the annual bald eagle survey has become the most essential element of a successful conservation strategy. The locations of active eagle nests have been recorded and provided to regulatory agencies. This information has been used to inform and educate landowners about bald eagle management. The information has also been used in the state and federal permit review process to proactively educate land planners about the habitat needs of bald eagles. In this way, the monitoring program has played a significant role in population recovery. However, the benefits of the survey extend well beyond the regulatory process. The annual survey has increased our understanding of bald eagle ecology. Survey information has provided one of the most comprehensive records of any eagle population in North America.

## THE BALD EAGLE SURVEY

The Nest Survey – In Virginia, bald eagles lay their eggs in January and February. Nest surveys are conducted on all coastal waterways during the first 3 weeks of March. Surveys are conducted by 2 observers in a high-wing Cessna 172 aircraft. The plane is maneuvered back and forth between the shoreline and a distance of approximately 1 km to search for nests. Every effort is made to find newly constructed nests and to check old nests. All nests detected are mapped and inspected for condition.

The Productivity Survey - The incubation period for bald eagles is approximately 30 days. All territories determined to be active during the earlier nest survey are rechecked for productivity from late April through mid May. As with the nest survey, productivity surveys are conducted by 2 observers in a high-wing Cessna 172 aircraft. The plane is flown low over nests, allowing observers to examine nest contents. All eaglets are counted and aged by sight.

### 2001 SURVEY

The bald eagle nest survey conducted in March of 2001 resulted in the detection of 366 occupied territories. The productivity survey conducted in May of 2001 documented 466 eaglets in active nests. Statistics for specific geographic areas are provided below.

#### Summary of 2001 Bald Eagle Survey

<b>GEOGRAPHIC AREA</b>	<b>OCCUP TERRS</b>	<b>CHICKS PROD</b>
POTOMAC RIVER	71	106
RAPPAHAN. RIVER	84	109
YORK RIVER	47	63
JAMES RIVER	75	115
WESTERN SHORE	14	25
EASTERN SHORE	20	26
LOWER TIDEWATER	4	11
INLAND AREAS	16	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>331</b>	<b>466</b>