



Backgrounder

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Bald Eagles and the Chesapeake Bay

The Chesapeake Bay watershed, with its variety of food and habitat, has long been a major breeding ground of bald eagles. The Bay watershed may once have provided habitat for as many as 3,000 pairs of breeding bald eagles. However, habitat destruction, poaching and contamination by DDT caused the bald eagle population to decline dramatically. Due to the ban on DDT and protection provided by the Endangered Species Act in 1973, the bald eagle has made a significant comeback throughout the nation. Today the Chesapeake Bay watershed has one of the highest bald eagle concentrations in the lower 48 states, with the 2001 nesting survey finding 618 active nests producing 908 young.

Working to Restore Chesapeake Bay Bald Eagles

In the late 1930s, the bald eagle population in the Chesapeake Bay watershed began to decline from poaching, habitat loss and loss of food. In the 1960s, researchers found that the pesticide DDT caused bald eagles and other birds to produce eggs with brittle shells, resulting in a further decline in the population to a low of 80 to 90 breeding pairs in 1970. As a result of this research, the use of DDT was banned in the United States in 1972. By 1977, only 72 active nests could be found in the Maryland and Virginia portion of the watershed; none were found in the Pennsylvania portion. Shortly thereafter, in 1973, the bald eagle was listed as endangered in the lower 48 states except for Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington and Oregon, where it was listed as threatened. With these protections, the population began to increase, and in 1995 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reclassified the bald eagle from "endangered" to "threatened" in the lower 48 states. In June 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service introduced a proposal to remove the bald eagle from the Endangered Species List, and concluded that the national bird had fully recovered. Currently, the Fish and Wildlife Service is assessing the status of the eagle in each recovery region to determine if it is appropriate to delist the species.



Because of extensive habitat protection and restoration efforts, improved water quality and the banning of the pesticide DDT, Chesapeake Bay bald eagle populations have greatly increased over the past two decades.

The long-term success of the Chesapeake basin populations will depend largely on the management of shoreline habitat and in particular, mature forested areas. While the threshold for downlisting the Chesapeake basin population to a non-threatened status has been partially met (300-400 nesting pairs and 1.1 eaglets per active nest sustained over five years), another criteria requiring the permanent protection of habitat for 300-400 nesting pairs still needs to be addressed. The rapid rate of shoreline development, if unchecked, will eliminate most large undisturbed forest blocks in the next 50-100 years. This habitat loss will either limit recovery of the bald eagles, or result in population decline.

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Visit the Chesapeake Bay Program website:
<http://www.chesapeakebay.net>

The Chesapeake Bay Program is restoring the Bay through a partnership among the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency representing the federal government, the State of Maryland, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the Commonwealth of Virginia, the District of Columbia, the Chesapeake Bay Commission, and participating citizen advisory groups.

Bald Eagles and Their Characteristics

The bald eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, is found throughout North America, from Alaska to the northern end of Mexico. In the Chesapeake Bay, bald eagles use large trees for nesting, roosting and perching. The trees must be in areas with limited human activity. Bald eagles are opportunistic predators and scavengers that consume many different prey species. The species eats fish when available, but will shift to a variety of other birds, mammals and turtles, both live and as carrion, when fish are scarce.

Ideal eagle habitat consists of mature shoreline forests with scattered openings, near water with abundant fish and waterfowl. Approximately sixty percent of eagle nests in the Chesapeake region are situated in loblolly pines, but can also be found in other large, "super-canopy" tree species, such as white oak and American beech. Nests can be up to six feet in diameter and weigh hundreds of pounds. They are usually constructed of large sticks and lined with soft materials such as pine needles and grasses. Bald eagles often mate for life, and will lay eggs from January to March, with the peak in February. Adult females will lay one to three eggs which will hatch after approximately 35 days.

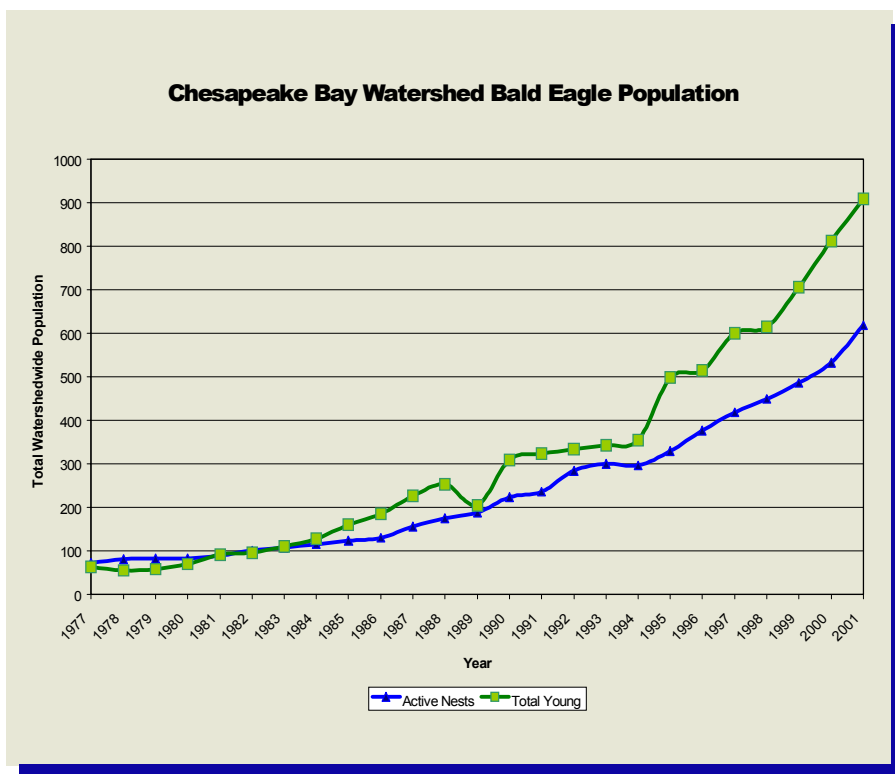
Chicks will fledge at 10 to 12 weeks of age. In the Chesapeake Bay watershed, eagles often leave their nests between June and July. Eagles develop the white head and tail around their fourth or fifth year. Adult bald eagles reach a size of approximately three feet from head to tail, weigh between 10 and 12 pounds and have a wingspread of up to seven feet.

Chesapeake 2000: Helping to Restore the Bald Eagle

In June 2000, Bay Program partners signed *Chesapeake 2000*, the watershedwide plan directing restoration efforts through the next decade.

The bald eagle will benefit from commitments to restore 2,010 miles of waterside forest buffers by 2010, to conserve existing forests along all streams and shorelines, to promote the expansion and connection of contiguous forests through land conservation measures, and to improve the quality of local waters and the Bay.

For more information about Chesapeake Bay bald eagles, please visit our website at http://www.chesapeakebay.net/bald_eagle.htm.



2001 Chesapeake Bay Bald Eagle Population Distribution	
District of Columbia	1 Active Nest 1 Young
Pennsylvania	20 Active Nests 29 Young
Maryland	297 Active Nests 432 Young
Virginia	300 Active Nests 446 Young
2001 Baywide Total	618 Active Nests 908 Young
2000 Baywide Total	533 Active Nests 813 Young

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