

Bald Eagle

DESCRIPTION: The adult bald eagle, symbol of the United States, is an iconic bird. Five distinct plumage phases mark the transition from the nearly uniform, dark brown plumage of an immature bird to the distinctive white head, white tail and dark brown body of the adult. Bald eagles reach adult plumage at age 5.

There is no difference in plumage between males and females, but females are slightly larger than males. Bald eagles are 27–35 inches long and have a wingspan of 71–89 inches. They usually weigh 6–10 pounds, but can weigh up to 14 pounds. Their size decreases with decreasing latitude, so bald eagles that nest in Arizona are smaller than those in Alaska.

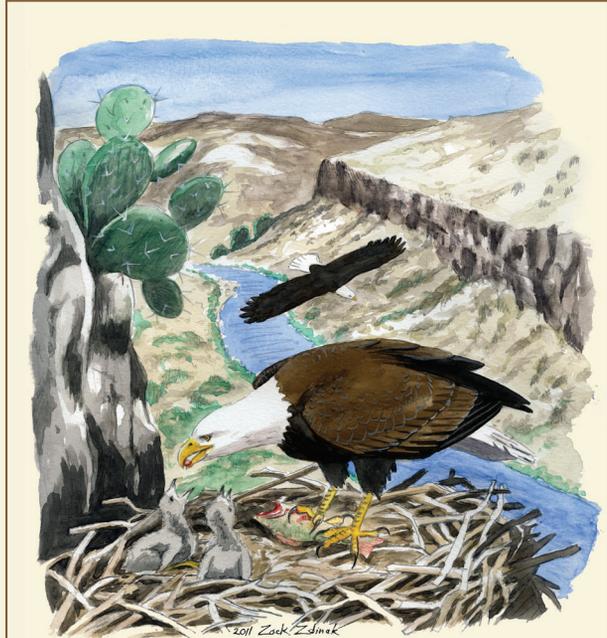
Adult bald eagles are unmistakable, but misidentification does occur. When in immature plumage, they can be mistaken for the similar-sized but dark-bodied golden eagle. As bald eagles near adult plumage, they develop a dark eye-line, which can lead to misidentification as osprey.

DISTRIBUTION: Bald eagles are restricted to North America, mainly Canada and the United States, with a limited presence south into Mexico. In Arizona, they can be found primarily in central and northern Arizona, usually near perennial streams, rivers and lakes.

HABITAT: In the winter, bald eagles may roost communally in areas that provide protection from adverse weather conditions and are located near adequate food supplies. Breeding bald eagles usually build nests within 1 mile of water and in locations with commanding views. Throughout North America, bald eagles nest predominantly in the tallest trees available. In areas

such as Arizona where tall trees are limited, bald eagles also nest high on cliff faces, ledges and pinnacles.

BIOLOGY: Bald eagles generally form a lifelong pair bond. If one dies, the survivor will replace its mate. In Arizona, courtship and nest building occur from November to February. The female lays one to three white eggs from December to March. Incubation lasts 35 days. Nestlings hatch from January through April, and fledglings leave the nest from April to June. Nesting activity in northern latitudes occurs later. Nestlings remain in the nest for nine to 12 weeks. Both adults share in nest building, incubation, territorial defense, foraging



The population of bald eagles in Arizona has continually increased because of an intensive management program.

HERITAGE SPOTLIGHT

and feeding of the nestlings. Fledglings stay in their natal areas for about 1.5 months post-fledging.

Bald eagles primarily eat fish, but will take advantage of any readily available food source, from waterfowl and small mammals to carrion and road kill.

STATUS: Nationally, the bald eagle was removed from the Endangered Species Act list of threatened and endangered wildlife in March 2007. In Arizona, the bald eagle population continues to grow. In 1978, there were just nine occupied breeding areas; in 2011, there were 55 occupied breeding areas. Despite this growth, the status of this relatively small and isolated bald eagle population remains the focus of litigation.

HERITAGE FUNDING SPOTLIGHT: Thanks to the Heritage Fund, the Arizona Game and Fish Department has become the lead implementation agency for bald eagle management in Arizona. By using Heritage Fund dollars as match for federal fund sources, the department can double

or triple the value of every Heritage dollar. This has enabled the creation of programs such as the partnership-based Arizona Bald Eagle Management Program.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Increasing human populations, recreational pressures and development in or near breeding areas all have a negative effect on breeding bald eagles. Despite these pressures, the population of bald eagles in Arizona has continually increased because of an intensive management program, cooperation among agencies and broad public support. 🦅

■ Kenneth Jacobson is the eagle management coordinator for the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZEDNEK