

BALD EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucocephalus (Threatened Colorado, Federally)



Colorado has a stable population of bald eagles during midwinter.

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THE BALD EAGLE—SO named because of its white head—is found only in North America, and it's the continent's second largest bird of prey. Only the California condor, also on the federally endangered list, is larger.

If eagles were compared to humans, someone might be tempted to say they have "great bloodlines." These proud-looking creatures have figured prominently in mythology, literature and art and they've been widely employed as symbols of greatness. Here in the United States, the bald eagle is recognized as the country's national symbol, a distinction it has held since 1782.

Adult bald eagles, which typically have a wingspan of nearly 7 feet and may weigh around 9.5 pounds, have large brown bodies with white heads and tails, and they fly with deep strokes and soar on flattened wings. The younger members of the species lack the white markings and are frequently confused with golden eagles.

Bald eagles prefer to nest in large trees near water. They feed mainly on fish in

the summer, but in the winter they will eat dead or crippled animals such as waterfowl or winter-killed deer and elk as well as small animals such as prairie dogs.

Eagle abundance declined nationally due to increased human impacts in primary nesting areas. These impacts included habitat destruction, illegal shooting and pesticide poisoning. To combat those problems, existing nest sites and adjacent hunting areas must be kept free of human intrusion during the breeding season, and key areas must also be maintained along the major river systems for the wintering bald eagles.

Historically, only two to three pairs of bald eagles nested in Colorado, but the nesting pairs have recently increased to more than 45 each year. The state is a very popular wintering area for bald eagles. The annual midwinter count shows a stable population of 700-900 eagles.

The San Luis Valley in the southern part of the state is one of their favorite places because of its supply of fish and waterfowl from open water as well as its high population of rodents and rabbits.