



Photo by Gary Siftar

# The Bald Eagle in Oklahoma

## Introduction

Oklahoma is an important wintering area for Bald Eagles, consistently ranking among the top 10 states for numbers of birds. Each winter thousands of eagles migrate south from their nesting range and take up residence wherever they encounter open water and plentiful food. Because of an abundance of lakes and rivers and milder winter temperatures, Oklahoma is especially attractive to these magnificent birds. During severe winters in the north, 800 to 1,500 eagles may gather here. Over the last 20 years resident Bald Eagles have been restored to Oklahoma, and there are currently over 60 known Bald Eagle nests in the state.



An eaglet being fed with a puppet

## The Bald Eagle's Decline

In 1782, the year it was formally adopted as our national emblem, the Bald Eagle population was flourishing, possibly with as many as 20,000 nesting pairs in what is now the United States.

In the more than 200 years since the Bald Eagle became our living symbol of strength and freedom, its numbers have declined alarmingly. Settlement of our nation led to human encroachment and habitat destruction, killing of birds for trophies and open per-

secution because of people's prejudices toward predators. By the late 1800s, the Bald Eagle's range had shrunk until it was generally restricted to its current breeding range in Alaska, Canada, the Great Lakes states, Florida and the Pacific Northwest. By the early 1980s only about 2,400 nesting pairs lived in the lower 48 states. In addition, the widespread use of DDT, which was banned by 1972, resulted in thin-shelled eggs that

seldom hatched, further reducing eagle populations.

The Bald Eagle was first listed as an endangered species in 1967. In 1978 it was declared an endangered species in 43 states, including Oklahoma. It was not listed in Alaska, where approximately 30,000 birds still breed. Thanks to a conservation success story, in June 2007 the Bald Eagle was removed from the Endangered Species List.

## The Bald Eagle's Return

In 1984 the Sutton Avian Research Center, located in Bartlesville, Oklahoma, began a Bald Eagle Restoration Program to reestablish breeding Bald Eagles to the southeastern United States. Between 1984 and 1992 the Sutton Center raised and released 275 Southern Bald Eagles. Bald Eagle eggs were removed from nests in Florida and transported to the center's captive breeding facility in Bartlesville. Once there, the eggs were incubated and hatched. The eaglets were fed using a puppet to prevent them from imprinting on people. They were then moved to hacking towers located in high quality habitat in five southeastern states. They were kept confined to the tower until they were

ready to fledge, in the hope they would return to their release sites to establish territories and nests.

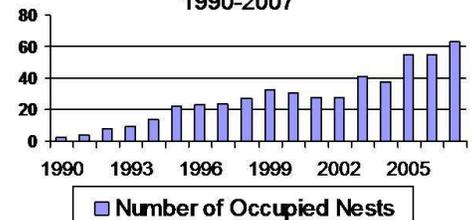
The program was a resounding success! In many cases, the captive-raised Bald Eagles have returned to their release sites to nest, and successive generations have spread throughout Oklahoma and the southeastern United States. Since 1990, the number of Bald Eagle nests in Oklahoma has increased almost annually to over 60 nests in 2007, and we expect the number of nests to continue to increase. We believe these increases are a direct result of the center's restoration program. In addition, eagles released by

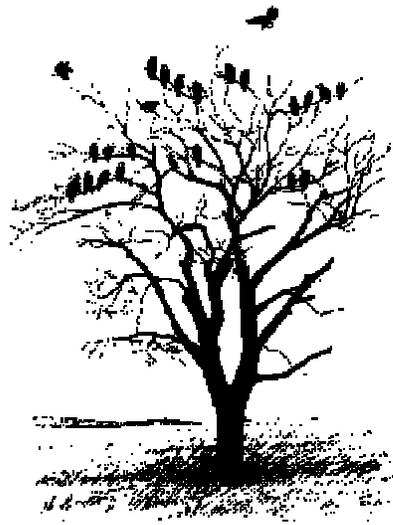
the Sutton Center have been observed nesting in Kansas, Texas, Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi.

Partially as a result of the efforts of the Sutton Avian Research Center, the Bald Eagle population in most areas of the U.S. had increased sufficiently for the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to remove the Bald Eagle from the Endangered Species List in June of 2007!

Visit [www.suttoncenter.org](http://www.suttoncenter.org) to learn more about their programs.

**Bald Eagle Nests in Oklahoma, 1990-2007**





## Wintering Bald Eagles

The Bald Eagle is a migratory species. Those birds that nest in the Great Lakes states and adjacent areas in Canada fly south to find food for the winter, and many find their way to Oklahoma. Eagles begin arriving here in late November and December. The migratory birds mingle with our resident Bald Eagle population. Their numbers peak in January and February, and most migratory birds have left for their northern breeding grounds by the end of March.

In contrast to their territorial behavior during the breeding season, Bald Eagles become quite sociable in winter. They roost communally at night in trees near a reliable food source, with the same trees traditionally used each year. Up to 200 birds have been known to use a single night roost in Oklahoma. Wintering birds often use different sites for feeding and nighttime roosts. A bird occasionally may travel up to 50 miles one way between its

feeding area and its night roost, but most feeding areas are located near the roost. Bald Eagles tend to feed early in the morning and may not feed every day. They usually detect prey while soaring or from a high perch.

Years ago, many of the Bald Eagles that wintered in Oklahoma lived on the prairies and fed on carrion found there, particularly buffalo. As the state was settled and land use changed, buffalo disappeared from the prairies and wintering Bald Eagles no longer congregated here in such large numbers. However, with the construction of numerous reservoirs during the second half of the last century, the amount of habitat suitable for the birds increased dramatically. Major reservoirs provide areas of flooded timber that make ideal eagle perches. Open water for fishing usually can be found below a dam even when other areas freeze.

## Where you can view Bald Eagles

Eagles have become a common winter sight at lakes and reservoirs across Oklahoma. According to an annual Bald Eagle survey, Oklahoma averages about 830 eagles each winter, although a record 1,540 flocked to our state in 1991.

These lakes (especially near spillways) have historically served as reliable Oklahoma Bald Eagle viewing areas. However, specific Bald Eagle migrating patterns vary each year depending on weather and other factors. Severity of northern winters and water discharges from individual reservoirs will often determine a particular lake's "eagle attractiveness." These conditions can change overnight; therefore, a good rule of thumb is to call ahead for up-to-date wildlife viewing information.

- Lake Eufaula
- Fort Gibson Reservoir
- Lake Tenkiller
- Grand Lake (Twin Bridges State Park)
- Salt Plains NWR
- Kaw Lake
- Robert S. Kerr Lake (Sequoyah NWR)
- Keystone Lake
- Wister Lake
- Arcadia Lake
- Lake Altus (Quartz Mountain State Park)
- Chickasaw National Recreation Area
- Lake Texoma
- Lake Spavinaw
- Washita NWR

The Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation's Nongame Wildlife Program compiles a list of eagle viewing events each year at [www.wildlifedepartment.com/eagletours2.htm](http://www.wildlifedepartment.com/eagletours2.htm)

## Protecting eagles

While an increase in public awareness about the value of eagles and the strict penalties for killing eagles seems to have lessened persecution, indiscriminate shootings still occur. Each year eagles are found shot to death or injured in Oklahoma.

The Bald Eagle is protected by a number of state and federal laws, such as the Eagle Protection Act, each with stiff penalties. First time violators can spend up to one year in jail or be fined \$100,000 on a misdemeanor charge. A second consecutive violation is automatically consid-

ered a felony with two years imprisonment and a \$250,000 fine. It is illegal to pursue, harm, harass, take or attempt to take, possess, sell, purchase or transport either eagles, eagle parts or their eggs.

If you know of anyone committing such a violation, call Operation Game Thief at 1-800-522-8039, or contact the state game warden in your county. You should also call the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Law Enforcement Agent in your area: (918) 581-7469 or (405) 231-5251.

## Nesting Bald Eagles

Bald Eagles have two subspecies, the northern race and the smaller southern race. Historically, eagles nesting in Oklahoma were probably the southern subspecies. During the last century, numbers of nesting eagles have decreased in our state coinciding with a general decline in eagles nationwide. However, since 1990, Bald Eagles have made a stunning comeback (See The Eagle's Return on front page) with over 60 active nest in Oklahoma as of 2007.

What to do if you see an eagle nest: Bald Eagle nests are huge structures of sticks, usually built near the top of a large tree not far from the water. It will be tended by two adult eagles anywhere between January through June. If you think you have found a Bald Eagle nest, report it by calling (405) 521-4616. **STAY AWAY FROM THE NEST AREA!** As with all raptors, nesting eagles are easily disturbed and may abandon a nest if approached.



Photo by Robert C. Main

# Bald and Golden Eagles in Flight

When an eagle is seen flying overhead, look for these characteristics to distinguish between Bald and Golden Eagles, young and adult birds.

## Golden Eagles

Oklahoma has a small nesting population of Golden Eagles in the western part of the state, with some wintering in remote areas throughout the state. These birds, while not listed as endangered, have also suffered population declines. In the 1980s, perhaps only six to ten pairs of Golden Eagles nested in Oklahoma. The two species of eagles are not closely related. The Golden Eagle is a more western bird that ranges over mountains and grasslands, feeding primarily on rabbits, rodents and other small mammals. This species is protected by most of the same state and federal laws as the Bald Eagle and warrants the same respect we give our national symbol.



Working to save eagles that have been shot.



## If you find an injured eagle

Contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator. Two who specialize in raptors are Gary and Kathy Siftar in northeast Oklahoma, [www.okraptors.org](http://www.okraptors.org) at (918) 455-6627 or Rondi Large in central Oklahoma at WildCare, [www.wildcareoklahoma.org](http://www.wildcareoklahoma.org) at (405) 872-9338. They will be happy to assist or can provide the name of a rehabber in your area. Be sure to visit both their web sites for much more information on eagles, raptors and caring for injured wildlife.



The adult Bald Eagle with its dark body and white head and tail, is an unmistakable bird.



Immature Bald Eagles show a white line on the underwing coverts. The body is dark but usually has irregular white mottling in the feathers until close to adulthood.



(Red-tailed hawk shown for size comparison.)



Immature Golden Eagles have dark bodies with a white patch in the wing feathers and white at the base of the tail.



The adult Golden Eagle is solid dark brown with a golden nape of the neck and faint bars in the tail.

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There's a large bird soaring in the winter sky - is it an eagle?



Bald Eagles hold wings straight across with splayed wingtips.



Turkey Vultures hold wings in a "V" shape.



Red-tailed Hawks hold wings straight across with splayed wingtips turned upward.

# Bald Eagle facts

**Name:** The word "bald" originally meant "white-headed." The scientific name, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, means "white-headed sea eagle" in Latin.

**Size:** With a 6.5- to 7 foot wingspan, the Bald Eagle is one of the largest birds of prey in the world. Adults are 3 to 3.5 feet tall and weigh 8 to 15 pounds. Like many predatory birds, the female is larger than the male, but size cannot be used conclusively for identification.

**Color:** Male and female Bald Eagles are identical in color. The distinctive white head and tail mark an adult, a sexually mature bird that is at least 4 to 5 years old. Younger individuals are almost solid brown, although a general mottling in the body feathers and a light coloration in the head and tail develop in older immatures. Both young and adult Bald Eagles have yellow legs. The young birds have a dark beak and black eyes, both of which turn bright yellow as they become adults.

**Similar Species:** Immature Bald Eagles often are confused with Golden Eagles, which are also nearly solid brown. One characteristic that sets the two species apart is the leg. The Bald Eagle's legs are naked, while Golden Eagles have feathers all the way down to the talons. In flight, Bald Eagles soar with flat wings while Golden Eagles soar with their wings raised in a slight "V."

**Foods:** Fish comprise the bulk of the Bald Eagle's diet. In midwinter, dead or crippled waterfowl and other wildlife become important food sources.

**Prey Size:** The weight of prey items varies from tiny fish to larger carrion. An eagle would have difficulty carrying anything greater than its own weight, and eagle prey are most frequently within the 3 to 5-pound range.

**Nest:** Nests usually are built near the top of a large tree. Enlarged annually, a Bald Eagle nest can become the largest of any North American bird. The record nest measured 20 feet deep, 10 feet wide and weighed two tons!

**Eggs:** Bald Eagles lay two (rarely three) white eggs each year. Both parents incubate the eggs for a 35-day period.

**Young:** At 10 to 12 weeks of age, eaglets are fully feathered, nearly full grown and can fly from the nest.

**Longevity:** Although the life expectancy of wild eagles may be 30 years, some have lived 50 years in captivity.

**Eyesight:** The Bald Eagle's eyesight is estimated to be 5 to 6 times sharper than a human's.

**Speed:** Eagles fly 20 to 60 miles per hour in normal flight and dive at more than 100 miles an hour.



## How to help

Because of the overwhelming need for permanent care for injured eagles the Iowa Tribe is committed to expanding the facility. Injured eagles that are non-releasable are currently being euthanized due to lack of space. The proposed expansion will include a triage room and additional side mews (large open cages for non-releasable eagles). With the aviary expansion the additional space will result in the ability to house 30 additional eagles. To support this project a total of \$300,000 is needed.

The Iowa Tribe is requesting your donations to support their work with eagles.

Please send donations to the address below care of the Grey Snow Eagle House:

Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma  
RR 1 Box 721  
Perkins, Oklahoma 74059  
(888) 336-4692

## Saving eagles

The Iowa Tribe of Oklahoma, with funds provided by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Services (FWS), has developed an eagle rehabilitation program in order to care for injured eagles and increase community awareness of wildlife care and native culture. Currently this has only been done by various independent wildlife rehabilitation organizations nationwide.

The eagle aviary named the Bah Kho-je Xla Chi (Grey Snow Eagle House) was completed in January



2006 and has been built to protect Bald Eagles and Golden Eagles. The facility is located in Perkins, Oklahoma. The eagles are cared for daily by the Aviary Manager, an Iowa Tribal Elder, who became certified by the FWS as an Eagle Rehabilitator.

As of January 2009 the Grey Snow Eagle House offers a home to eight non-releasable Bald Eagles and one non-releasable Golden Eagle. Those debilitated eagles that cannot be released to the wild due to the nature or severity of their injuries are fully protected by the Iowa Tribe through the FWS Religious-Use Permit. This permit has allowed the tribe the opportunity to gather eagle feathers as they

naturally molt to be distributed to tribal members for their use in cultural activities.

In January 2006 the Iowa Tribe became the first Tribe in the country to be granted a permit through the FWS as Eagle Rehabilitators, and in June 2006 they released the very first tribal rehabilitated Bald Eagle back into the wild at the Sequoyah National Wildlife Refuge. To date the Iowa Tribe has received over 1,000 visitors from around the country to visit the facility.

Contact Aviary Manager Victor Roubidoux, at 405-334-7471 to arrange for a visit. Please visit the Bah Kho-je Xla Chi web site, [www.iowanation.org/Government/eagle-aviary.html](http://www.iowanation.org/Government/eagle-aviary.html) to learn more and see videos of the facility and actual eagle releases.

Brochure courtesy of the Tulsa Audubon Society

Tulsa Audubon has been a leader in the protection of Bald Eagles for over 30 years. A non-public Eagle Sanctuary is owned by the Society for the protection of wintering Bald Eagles at Lake Keystone, and we host annual Eagle Days to provide the public an opportunity to observe Bald Eagles below Keystone Dam in January. For more information on our activities, visit our web site at [www.tulsaaudubon.org](http://www.tulsaaudubon.org)

