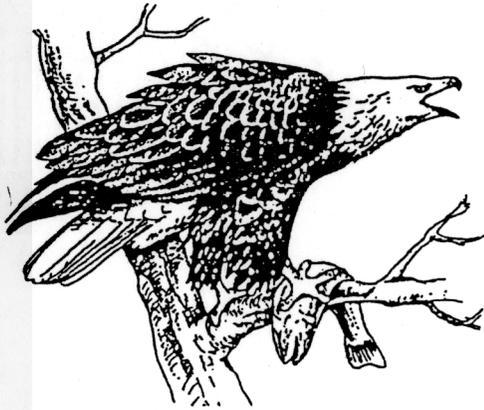


# Bald Eagle

*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*



## Official Status: Endangered

Endangered species are species that are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range. It is unlawful to kill, harm, or harass endangered species.

**Listed:** 43 Federal Register 6233; February 14, 1978 (South Dakota and 42 other states).

**Historical Status:** Bald eagles are thought to have historically nested in all of the lower 48 states. In South Dakota, bald eagles were apparently common along the Missouri River and its tributaries. It is estimated that in the lower 48 states there were 50,000 breeding pairs of bald eagles in pre-colonial times. Due to human activities, the population in the lower 48 states reached a low of 400 breeding pairs in the early 1960's.

**Present Status:** Bald eagles are abundant in Alaska and Canada. In 1990, there were approximately 2,500 breeding pairs in the lower 48 states. In 1992, the first bald eagle nesting attempt since the late 1800's was reported at the Sand Lake National Wildlife Refuge in Brown County, South Dakota. Two attempts were reported in 1992 at the Karl Mundt National Wildlife Refuge in Gregory County along the Missouri River. Approximately 250 bald eagles winter in South Dakota each year.

**Habitat:** Bald eagles prefer forested habitats near bodies of water. Eagles concentrate near open water, such as below the tailrace of the Oahe Dam, in the wintertime. Migrating eagles are found throughout South Dakota.

**Life History:** Sexual maturity for eagles is reached at four to six years of age. Adults mate for life and tend to use the same nest year after year. The majority of nest sites are within 1/2 mile of water. Nests are usually at the top of tall trees, although cliffs are occasionally used. Nests can become enormous, weighing more than a ton. Usually two eggs are laid in a clutch. The eggs hatch after 35 days of incubation. Both parents assist in the feeding of the young. Young leave the nest after 75 days. Bald eagles feed on fish, waterfowl, and other birds, small mammals, and carrion.

**Aid To Identification:** The white head and tail of mature bald eagles is an identifying characteristic. Immature birds are more difficult to identify. They are predominately brown with an increasing amount of white mottling as the bird matures. The wingspan of seven feet tends to distinguish the young birds from all other birds, except the golden eagle.

**Reasons For Decline:** Bald eagle populations declined in the early 20th century due to loss of habitat, shooting, and trapping. During the 1950's and 1960's, the use of pesticides, especially DDT, became a major problem. DDT residues accumulated in fish, a major food source of eagles. The residues then accumulated in the eagles that ate the fish and subsequently caused the thinning of the eggshells. DDT is now banned in the United States. Shooting, trapping, poisoning, electrocution on power lines, and human disturbance continue to be problems. In South Dakota, most of the forest habitat along the Missouri River was destroyed by the main-stem dams. What little forest habitat remains is threatened by clearing in order to build riverside developments.

**Recommendations:** No human activity should be allowed within one mile of an active nest during breeding season. Stay at least 300 yards from perched or wintering eagles. Wounded or sick eagles should immediately be reported to a wildlife agency. Clearing of waterside forests should be avoided. Report nesting birds to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (605) 224-8693, or the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, (605) 773-4345, immediately.

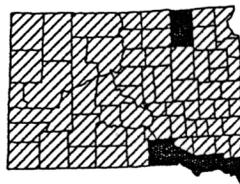
**Comments:** In addition to being protected by the Endangered Species Act of 1973, the bald eagle is protected by the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940. The bald eagle is the national symbol of the United States.

**References:** Northern States Bald Eagle Recovery Plan by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1983.

## Bald Eagle

■ Breeding Range  
(Northern Alaska Not Shown)

▨ Migratory Range



South Dakota



North America

Present distribution of the bald eagle.

• 1993 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service; Pierre, South Dakota