Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Guidelines for Landowners Using Conservation Practices

Missouri Department of Conservation

Common name ▪ Bald Eagle
Scientific name ▪ *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*
State status ▪ S3
Federal status ▪ None

Ecology

Bald eagles are common migrants and winter residents throughout Missouri and are uncommon breeders along some of the major rivers and larger reservoirs in the state. During winter, they congregate near rivers and reservoirs with open water and often near large concentrations of waterfowl. Wintering eagles usually occupy river habitats between November 15 and March 1 where they use large diameter (>12 inches diameter at breast height) sycamores, cottonwoods and other riparian trees as daytime perches and night roosts. Winter communal roost sites used by two or more eagles are common, and some may be used by 100 or more eagles during periods of high use. They usually perch within a riparian corridor or along lake shores where there is limited human activity.

Bald eagles feed mainly on fish, but also on dead or crippled waterfowl, small mammals and carrion. During winter nights, bald eagles may congregate at communal roosts, sometimes traveling as far as 10 miles from feeding areas to roost sites.

The period from January 1 to March 1 is important for initiating nesting activity. Nests are usually built in the top of a giant tree. March 1 to May 15 is the most critical time for incubation and rearing of young. Incubation lasts 34 to 40 days. Females lay one to three eggs per clutch, and in Missouri, usually two chicks survive to fledging. Adults may not lay every year.

Photo Credit: Missouri Department of Conservation

Reasons for Decline

Historically, bald eagles were found in all 50 states except Hawaii and nested in 45 of the 48 contiguous states. Declines in populations of bald eagles took place throughout the United States from the 1950s into the early 1970s. Eagle population declines are due to loss of riparian habitat, human disturbances such as shooting, poisoning, trapping and pesticide-induced reproductive failure.

Eagles fed on fish that were contaminated with the pesticide DDT. As this pesticide accumulated in the eagles, it caused them to lay thin-shelled eggs that broke under the weight of the incubating parent before hatching. After DDT was banned in 1972, populations of eagles stabilized and slowly began to increase. Currently, however, habitat loss is a concern for bald eagles. Land use changes and activities that adversely alter roost sites may disrupt roosting areas for eagles. Recovery has been assisted by intensive management that included systematic monitoring, enhanced protection, captive breeding, relocation of wild birds, and publicity.

Recommendations

While recently delisted from the federal and state endangered species list in Missouri, Bald Eagles continue to be protected by the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act (BGEPA) of 1940. Bald eagles are sensitive environmental indicators, and their protection and management is important for many wildlife species. It is important to maintain food sources and may be beneficial to protect or develop buffer strips of trees along waterways. Individual Bald Eagle pairs may react very differently to different kinds of disturbances, and are

particularly vulnerable between the nest building and incubation phases (typically mid-December through mid-May in Missouri). Project activities that may disturb nesting or roosting Eagles should be evaluated by consulting the National Bald Eagle Management Guidelines (some of which are summarized below), available at http://www.fws.gov/migratorybirds/issues/BaldEagle/NationalBaldEagleManagementGuidelines.pdf.
.
Consider the balance between adverse and beneficial practices when determining the overall effect of a conservation practice.

Beneficial Practices

- Dispose of chemicals, toxic waste, garbage and wash water from trucks in areas designated for such wastes. These sites should be away from sinkholes, streams and other bodies of water.
- Maintain and/or restore existing natural vegetation, riparian/wetland habitats, streambanks, streamside vegetation, and mature forests where appropriate.
- Maintain the availability of food resources by enhancing habitat for waterfowl, fish, and other aquatic wildlife.
- Maintain perch trees within 50 feet of large bodies of water.

Adverse Practices

- Do not cut down an existing or even recently abandoned Eagle nest tree - this is a violation of the federal BGEPA.
- Operation of motorized vehicles or watercraft within at least 330 feet of an active Bald Eagle nest during the breeding season, except where eagles have demonstrated a tolerance for such activity.
- Avoid conducting timber/habitat management during the breeding season, unless otherwise advised by MDC staff. If activities must be conducted during breeding season, maintain a buffer of at least 660 feet from active Eagle nests.
- Avoid producing loud, intermittent noises such as blasting or use of larger fireworks (those classified as Class B explosives) within a ½ mile of an active eagle nest during the breeding season, unless the eagles have shown greater tolerance to similar activities.
- Construction of dams and impoundment structures in rivers where bald eagles occur.
- Application of pesticides and insecticides with regard to water practices.

Information Contacts

Missouri Department of Conservation
Policy Coordination Section
P.O. Box 180
2901 W. Truman Blvd
Jefferson City, MO 65102-0180
Telephone: 573-751-4115
http://www.mdc.mo.gov/nathis/endangered/

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Ecological Services Field Office
101 Park DeVille Dr., Suite A
Columbia, MO 65203
Telephone: 573-234-2132
http://www.fws.gov/midwest/partners/missouri.html

Legal

The Missouri Department of Conservation prepared these guidelines for conservation practices with assistance from other state agencies, contractors, and others to provide guidance to those people who wish to voluntarily act to protect wildlife and habitat.

Compliance with these management guidelines is not required by the Missouri wildlife and forestry law or by any regulation of the Missouri Conservation Commission. Other federal, state or local laws may affect construction practices.

“State Endangered Status” is determined by the Missouri Conservation Commission under constitutional authority, and specific requirements for impacts to such species are expressed in the Missouri Wildlife Code, rule 3 CSR 10-4.111.

Species listed under the Federal Endangered Species Act must be considered in projects receiving federal funds or requiring permits under the Clean Water Act, with compliance issues resolved in consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.