News Article

By: John E. Woodmansee, Extension Educator, Agriculture/Natural Resources
E-mail: jwoodman@purdue.edu   **Phone:** 260-244-7615   **Web:** www.extension.purdue.edu/whitley
Date: February 17, 2020
Please use by: February 27, 2020

The Mighty Bald Eagle

Have you seen a bald eagle recently? I still marvel when I see one in flight. It's exciting to see them swoop down near the surface of a river and snatch a fish. You may have even taken advantage of watching "eagle cams," set up to be a 24-hour video feed of an eagle's nest, such as the one hosted by the National Arboretum. Or, you may have participated in an "Eagle Watch" event, hosted by the Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR). Perhaps you have seen and kept an eye on an eagle's nest near you!

The bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) has been the national bird of the United States since 1782 when it was adopted as a core element in the Great Seal of the United States.

I learned only recently of what appears to be a long-standing and frequently perpetuated myth in American history that Benjamin Franklin preferred the turkey to the eagle as a national symbol. According to Harvard University, his tongue-in-cheek comments berating the eagle while extolling the turkey were taken out of context. Evidently, they were meant as a joke regarding the insignia of the Society of the Cincinnati, in which Franklin thought the bird depicted looked more like a turkey than an eagle. (I'm not a historian; you can do your own research and decide for yourself.)

Once a federal- and state-endangered species, due to hunting and use of certain pesticides (now banned), the bald eagle has recovered quite well.

Brian MacGowan, Purdue Extension wildlife specialist, said in a recent article that bald eagles were once listed under the Endangered Species Act. "However, their populations recovered to a level where they were delisted," he said. "Even so, Bald Eagles are still offered some level of protection under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act."

We are currently in bald eagle breeding season. "Winter is a time when Bald Eagles build nests in large trees or snags near sources of food – rivers, streams, and lakes," said MacGowan. "The nests they construct are very large (4-6 feet in diameter) and can weigh more than 1,000 pounds." He said they also construct alternate nests within their territory and will usually return to the same nesting territory year after year.

The Indiana Department of Natural Resources (DNR) website offers more facts on bald eagles and their young. They write that wintering eagles prefer mature trees along large, open bodies of water for daytime perches. At night, large trees in sheltered valleys and ravines are preferred for roosting, and it is common for eagles to roost in small groups during winter.

Indiana DNR further states that eagle eggs have a 35-day incubation period and that young eagles leave the nest or "fledge" at 11 to 12 weeks old. Adult eagles do not begin to nest until they are 4 or 5 years old. Eagles mate for life and return each year to the same location to nest and breed, selecting nest sites close to where they were raised as young.

Here are a few more interesting bald eagle facts brought to us by Indiana DNR:

- Immature bald eagles have mostly dark heads and bodies with white mottling throughout. Young birds will gain adult plumage at 5 years of age.
- Males and females are identical in color.
- Eagles can live up to 38 years in the wild.
- Males weigh 8 to 9 pounds; while females weigh 10 to 14 pounds.
- Bald eagles have a wingspan of 6.5 to 7 feet.
- Their total body length ranges from 28 to 38 inches.
- Bald eagles may fly up to 40 mph during normal flight, but they can reach speeds of 100 when diving for prey.

For more information, find MacGowan's article, entitled, "Bald Eagle Breeding Season Is Upon Us," at Purdue Extension's Got Nature? Blog at https://www.purdue.edu/fnr/extension/got-nature-blog/. Access Indiana DNR's information at https://www.in.gov/dnr/fishwild/3383.htm.