



Wildlife Notes

NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife

Endangered and Nongame Species Program



CONSERVE WILDLIFE
FOUNDATION OF NEW JERSEY

Bald Eagle

(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

THE BALD EAGLE IN NEW JERSEY

Historic population counts of bald eagles are not available for our state, but we do know that the population was exactly one nesting pair by 1970. The massive bald eagle decline was the result of persecution, followed by the impact of widespread use of the persistent pesticide DDT from the mid-1940s until it was banned in 1972. New Jersey's bald eagle population remained at one into the early 1980's. The ban of DDT combined with restoration efforts by biologists within the NJ Division of Fish and Wildlife's Endangered and Nongame Species Program (ENSP) acted to increase the number of New Jersey bald eagles to 146 active pairs in 2014.

The bald eagle is currently listed as endangered (breeding season) and threatened (non-breeding season) in New Jersey. The US Fish & Wildlife Service removed the bald eagle from the federal list of endangered species in 2007.

ENSP recovery efforts – first implemented in the 1980's – continue to bear fruit as New Jersey's eagle population has rebounded from the edge of extinction. In 1982, after Bear Swamp eagles (New Jersey's only active bald eagle nest since 1970) had failed to produce young for years, ENSP biologists removed an egg for artificial incubation, and fostered the young back to the nest. The necessity of this fostering technique was eggshell thinning as a result of DDT contamination that meant the eggs couldn't withstand normal incubation. Fostering continued successfully until 1989, when the previous female of the pair died and a new female was able to hatch her own eggs.

Increasing the production from a single nest, however, was not enough to boost the state's population in a reasonable amount of time. Mortality rates are high in young eagles (as high as

80%), and they do not reproduce until four or five years of age. ENSP instituted a hacking project in 1983 that resulted in the release of 60 young eagles in NJ over an eight year period. These eagles contributed to the population increase since 1990.

IDENTIFICATION

Adult bald eagles are distinguished by their full white heads and tails, but subadult and juvenile birds are brown overall with some white mottling. Both sexes have similar plumage, although the female is slightly larger than the male. With a wing span of six to seven feet, eagles are larger than most birds, but can be confused with vultures from a distance. While eagles eat mostly fish during the warmer months, they feed on waterfowl, muskrat, and carrion during winter and early spring.

BREEDING BIOLOGY

New Jersey bald eagles reside year-round, usually remaining in their nest area. Eagles usually build their large stick nests close to water in trees taller than the forest canopy. They begin courtship and nest building in early January, adding to their existing nest. Pairs lay one to three eggs in mid-January to early March, and incubate for about 35 days. Upon hatching, the chicks are helpless and require close parental care. After about five weeks, the young birds begin to stand up and feed themselves when the adults deliver food. Eagles fledge the nest at 11-12 weeks in late June to early July. Adults continue to feed young near the nest for a month while the eaglets learn to fly and hunt. In September many young eagles leave the area and may spend the winter in Chesapeake Bay area, where open water and abundant food provide favorable conditions. Recent telemetry studies show NJ eaglets may make long distance flights in nearly any direction before returning to our area.

MANAGEMENT

ENSP biologists continually work to manage and reduce disturbance in eagle habitats, especially around nest sites. Eagles are sensitive to human disturbance and will abandon their nest sites if people encroach on the area during the nesting season. Education and established viewing areas are important in minimizing disturbance, as are the efforts of eagle project volunteers. Biologists also work to protect habitat in a variety of ways, including working with landowners, land acquisition experts, and through the state's land use regulations.

Bald eagles are proven indicators of environmental health. As residents and consumers of fish, their health reflects the quality of resources shared by humans. ENSP continues to investigate the possible impacts of environmental contaminants on eagles and other raptors. ENSP monitors these species during the nesting season to evaluate nest success and assess any problems that occur.

How You Can Help

The ENSP receives no funding from state tax dollars. You can help support New Jersey's bald eagles by:

- Checking-Off for Wildlife on the NJ State Income Tax Form
- Purchasing a *Conserve Wildlife* license plate
- Participating in the *Adopt an Eagle Nest Program*
- Making a donation to the Conserve Wildlife Foundation of NJ, a non-profit organization dedicated to supporting the eagle project

www.conservewildlifenj.org

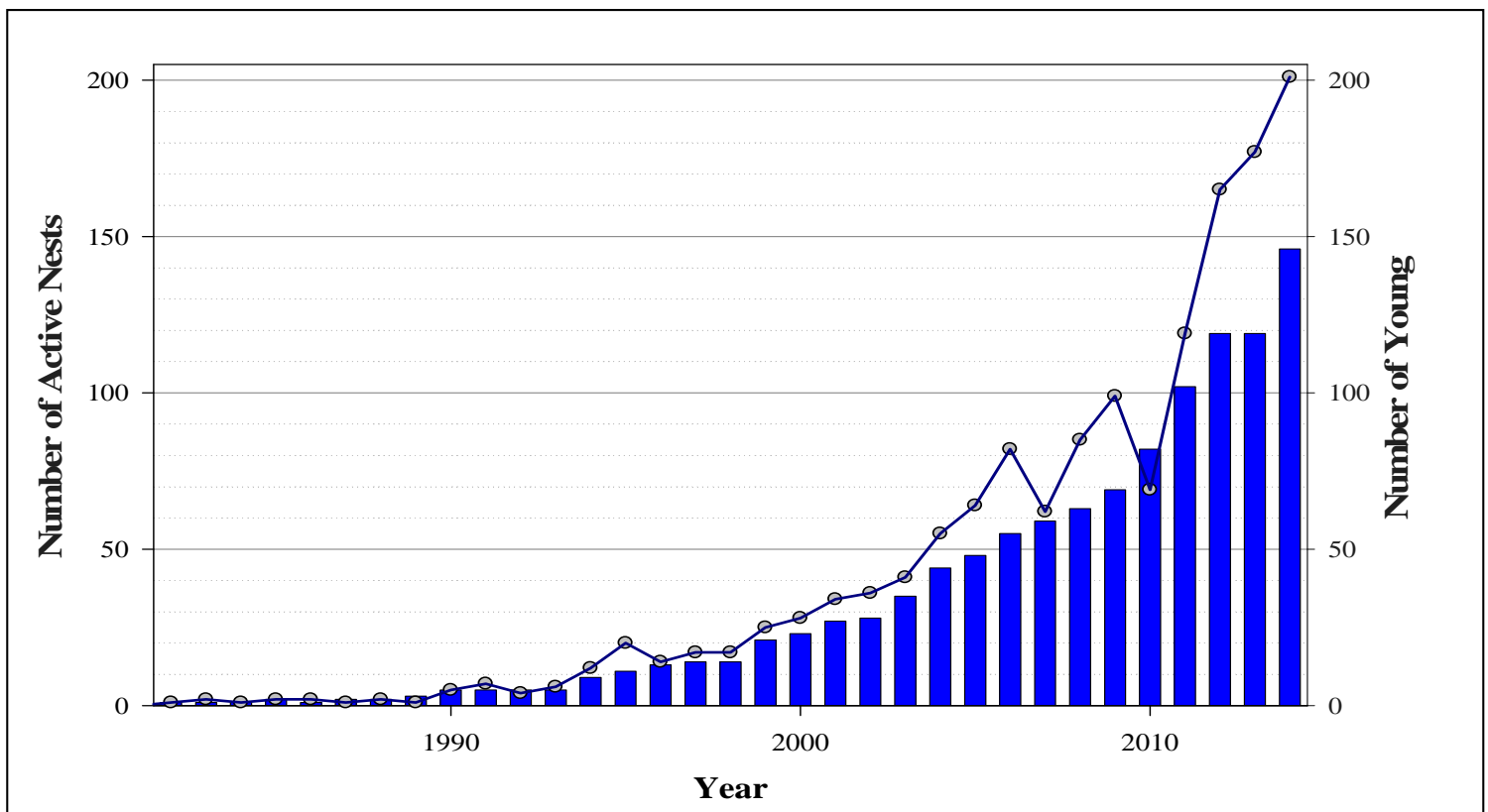
For more information, please contact the ENSP at:

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VISIT THE NJ EAGLE CAM AT:

www.conservewildlifenj.org/education/eaglecam



To learn where you can view eagles in the state, purchase the NJ Wildlife Viewing Guide, available from the CWF