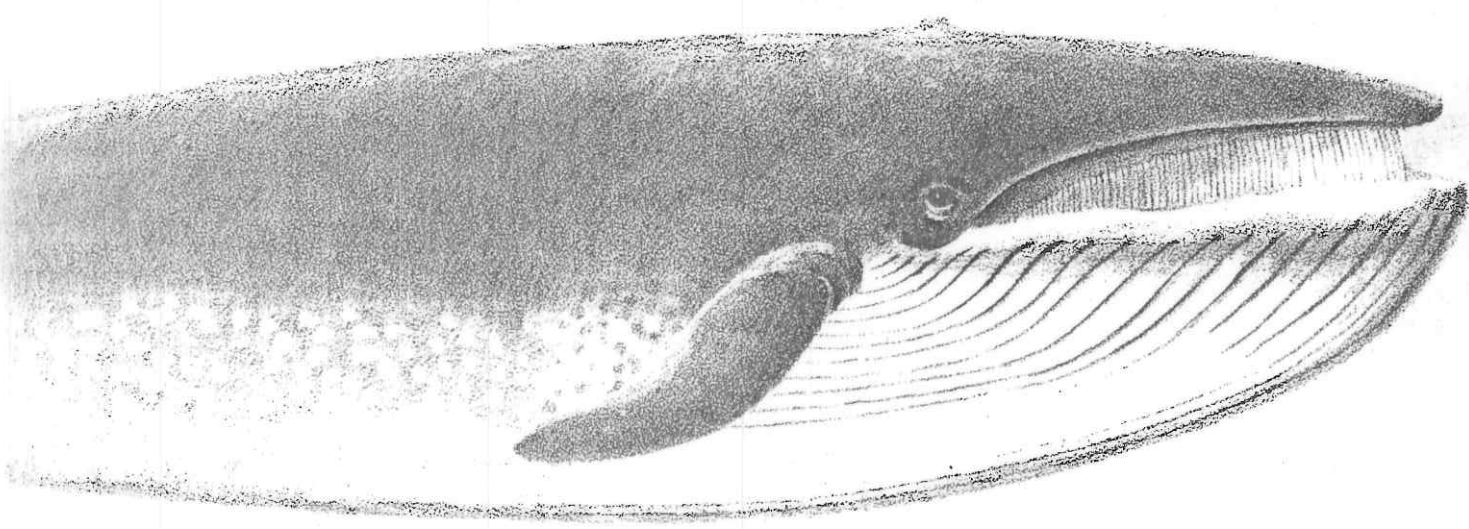


OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA

MAY - JUNE 1982



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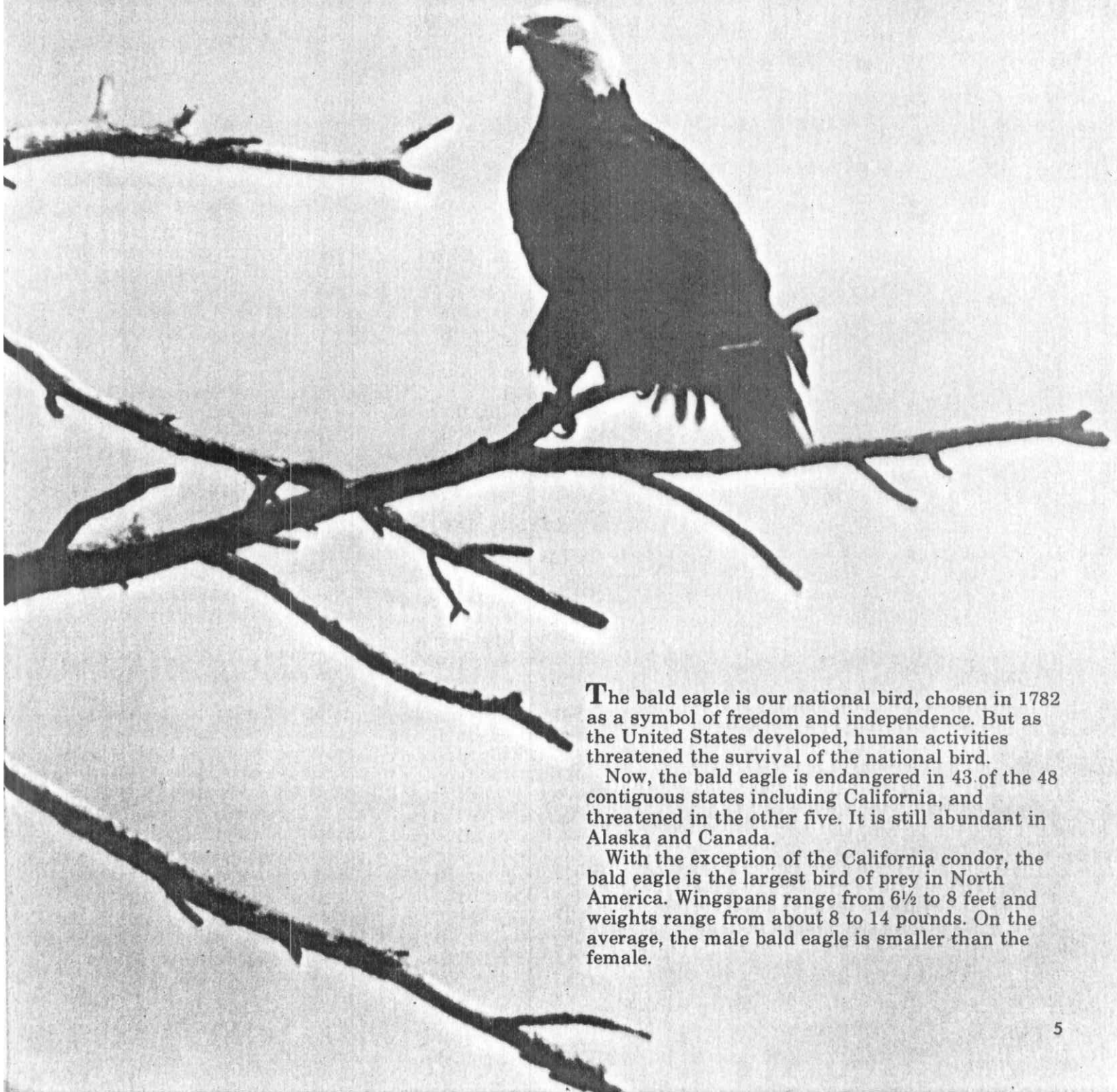
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Bald eagle endangered in 43 states

By Jan Bickett

DFG photo by Paul Wertz



The bald eagle is our national bird, chosen in 1782 as a symbol of freedom and independence. But as the United States developed, human activities threatened the survival of the national bird.

Now, the bald eagle is endangered in 43 of the 48 contiguous states including California, and threatened in the other five. It is still abundant in Alaska and Canada.

With the exception of the California condor, the bald eagle is the largest bird of prey in North America. Wingspans range from 6½ to 8 feet and weights range from about 8 to 14 pounds. On the average, the male bald eagle is smaller than the female.

Young bald eagles are mostly brown. Their heads and tails become progressively whiter until full adult plumage is reached at four or five years. DFG photo by Paul Wertz.



Adults are brownish-black with a white head, neck and tail, yellow legs and feet, and a large, yellow, hooked bill. The bird's scientific name, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, means white-headed sea eagle. The word "bald" comes from the middle English and Welsh word "balde," meaning "white."

Plumage of young bald eagles is mostly brown, blotched irregularly with white or buff. The head, neck and tail become progressively whiter over several annual molts until the bird reaches full adult plumage in four or five years.

Bald eagles are migratory. After the nesting season, birds in northern areas migrate south in response to cold weather and a reduced food supply. Where waters remain open and food supplies are adequate, eagles may live in the vicinity of their nests year-round. In California, bald eagles winter nearly statewide. Hundreds of birds from the northern states and Canada join the smaller California population during the winter. About half the state wintering population is found in the Klamath Basin.

Bald eagles are almost always found near river systems, large lakes, reservoirs or seashores. Food items vary depending on

location, time of year, and population cycles of prey species. Eagles feed primarily on fish, often boldly taken from other raptors, such as the osprey. In California, salmon runs are an important forage source for wintering eagles. When fish are not available, they feed on carrion and take some small, weak or dying prey—including waterfowl or livestock carcasses. In the Klamath Basin, they have

In California, bald eagles winter nearly statewide

been observed eating field mice. Perch trees overlooking foraging areas are a necessary part of their habitat.

Bald eagles have been accused of carrying off pets, poultry, lambs and even children. In reality, any object an eagle carries must be very small. The bird itself weighs only 8 to 14 pounds, and cannot possibly carry even its own weight.

The courtship of bald eagles occurs in winter and involves aerial somersaults and other displays. The pair remains together for life. In California, eagles construct large stick nests

20-90 feet up in tall trees. Most nests are constructed in dominant conifers, usually ponderosa or sugar pines, within one mile of a waterfront. Generally, nests are 5 to 7 feet deep and 6 to 8 feet in diameter. An eagle may use the same nest several times over a period of years, often building two or more nests and using them alternately. Over the years, the birds rearrange and add to the nest until the structure reaches massive proportions. One nest, found in St. Petersburg, Florida, was 20 feet deep, 9½ feet in diameter and weighed about two tons.

Bald eagles defend a definite nesting area or territory that varies in size, depending on local topographic features and other environmental factors. They defend their territory from other adults, and often from subadult eagles and other birds. Much of their foraging may be done outside the nesting area. Their defense of the nesting area gradually decreases during the weeks following fledging, as the young learn to fly.

The onset of the nesting season varies with latitude, beginning as early as November in Florida. In California, one to three eggs are laid from late February to late March. Incubation is shared by

both parents and lasts approximately 35 days. The parents bring food to the nest and rip it into small pieces for the eaglets. The newly-hatched young are covered with white down, which gives way to a heavier gray down in two or three weeks. At four or five weeks, feathers appear and wing flapping begins, and by 10 to 11 weeks, the young are ready to leave the nest. The young continue to depend on parental care for several weeks after leaving the nest, returning frequently to be fed.

During the winter, bald eagles tend to concentrate in large numbers near major waterways and large bodies of water. Perch trees near the food supply are used during the day. Night roosts can be farther away from the food supply, and are usually somewhat protected from wind

One nest in Florida weighed about two tons

and inclement weather. The eagles leave night communal roosting areas at first light to search for food, and return shortly before dark. In California, winter communal roosts of over 100 eagles have been found.

Many factors have contributed to the decline of the bald eagle. Expanding human populations since the late 1800s have replaced eagle habitat with cities, industry, lumbering and recreation. Egg collecting, shooting and trapping have contributed to the decline. Most states offered bounties on eagles and other raptors until fairly recently, for the presumed benefit of the livestock industry. Poison bait for predators of livestock has also resulted in the death of numerous bald eagles. Flying into power lines has caused eagle deaths and injuries.

The Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940 made it unlawful to take, possess, sell, purchase, barter, transport, export or import, or



shoot any bald eagle. Even so, populations continued to decline due to human disturbance, loss of habitat, illegal shooting, and lowered reproductive rates due to pesticide contamination. Pesticides, especially DDT, can cause eggshell thinning and death of the embryo.

Many state and federal agencies and private organizations are working toward enhancing the status of the bald eagle. The California Bald Eagle Working Team was established in 1974 to advise land and wildlife management agencies and provide guidance for bald eagle conservation activities in California. It is composed of

representatives from state and federal agencies and private industry.

Purposes of the recovery team are to 1) collect and disseminate information on bald eagles in California to appropriate persons, 2) provide technical assistance to agencies interested in the conservation of bald eagles and their habitats, 3) develop policies and procedures to promote the conservation of bald eagles in California, and 4) coordinate studies and research, habitat management, and species management of bald eagles in California.

Biologists have prepared nest territory plans for most

California nesting areas. Management plans call for protective zones surrounding the nest sites, because it is known the eagles are wary of humans and human disturbance can cause the birds to abandon nests. Measures to protect eagle nesting territories are addressed in timber harvest plans and environmental impact reviews for private lands, in U.S. Forest Service or other agency planning, and in Federal Endangered Species Act Section 7 consultations for federal lands or actions.

Statewide nesting surveys were initiated in 1968, but thorough coverage was not attained until 1977. Each year several new nesting territories are discovered, partly or mainly because of continually improving survey efforts. The Forest Service has conducted special bald eagle studies for forest planning. Recently, the USFS has been experimenting with sound recordings of wild bald eagles to determine long-term occupancy

patterns of individual birds at nesting territories.

Annual midwinter surveys of California's wintering eagle population began in January 1978, part of a national survey system approved by the National Wildlife Federation. In recent years, key wintering habitats have been identified, and several major communal winter roosts have been protected from disturbance through land acquisition or management. The USFS has purchased private land within the 6,700-acre Three Sisters Bald Eagle winter roost area in the Klamath National Forest, one of the largest winter roost areas outside of Alaska. In 1979, studies began in the Klamath Basin to determine habitat characteristics of winter roosts. Several studies have been made since 1975 to assess bald eagle winter habitat needs on USFS and U.S. Bureau of Land Management lands.

In 1980, the Institute for Wildlife Studies, in cooperation

with the Santa Catalina Island Conservancy, began a long-range project to restore bald eagle breeding populations to the Channel Islands off southern California, where there have been no eagle nestings for over 30 years. In 1980 and 1981, 12 bald eagles were taken as wild nestlings—11 in Washington state and one in California—and fledged from artificial platform "nests" on Catalina Island. The results of the project will not be known for several years.

When sick or injured bald eagles are found, they are routinely placed in rehabilitation facilities, if possible. In recent years, several attempts have been made to release rehabilitated birds. Any dead bald eagles are routinely autopsied to determine cause of mortality, and are analyzed for contaminants. #

Jan Bickett has worked as a seasonal aide with the DFG's endangered species program.

Federal law protects bald eagles

By Andy Cortez

Bald eagles have been protected by federal law for more than 40 years. The Bald Eagle Protection Act, adopted on June 8, 1940, prohibits the possession of bald and golden eagles or their nests and eggs.

While golden eagles are not an endangered species, they are included in the statute as an aid to enforcement officers. To the untrained eye, immature bald eagles appear virtually identical to golden eagles.

The Bald Eagle Protection Act, found in Section 668-668(c) of Title 16, U.S. code, also prohibits the sale, purchase, transport, export or import of bald or golden eagles or their parts.

The Secretary of the Interior may, under certain circumstances, issue a permit to take or possess eagles. Permits are usually issued for scientific and exhibitional uses, or American Indian religious purposes. The governor of any state can also request authorization to take eagles that prey upon livestock in the state.

The maximum penalty for violation of the Bald Eagle Protection Act is a fine of \$5,000 and a term of one year in federal prison. Subsequent convictions

may result in a maximum fine of \$10,000 and two years in prison. As an incentive to turn in eagle poachers, the U.S. Congress has provided that persons who give information which leads to the conviction of an eagle poacher may receive up to \$2,000.

The California Legislature adopted a similar protective law in 1970 by enacting Section 2050-2055 of the California Fish and Game Code, commonly referred to as the Endangered Species Law. These statutes make it a misdemeanor to take, possess or sell bald eagles or their parts. The maximum penalty under the state law is a \$1,000 fine and one year in jail.

If you have information about a violation of the laws protecting eagles, phone the California Department of Fish and Game toll free at 1-800-952-5400. You can remain anonymous, and if your information leads to an arrest, you will become eligible for a cash reward up to \$500 from the DFG's CalTIP program. #

Andy Cortez is a fish and game warden at DFG headquarters in Sacramento.