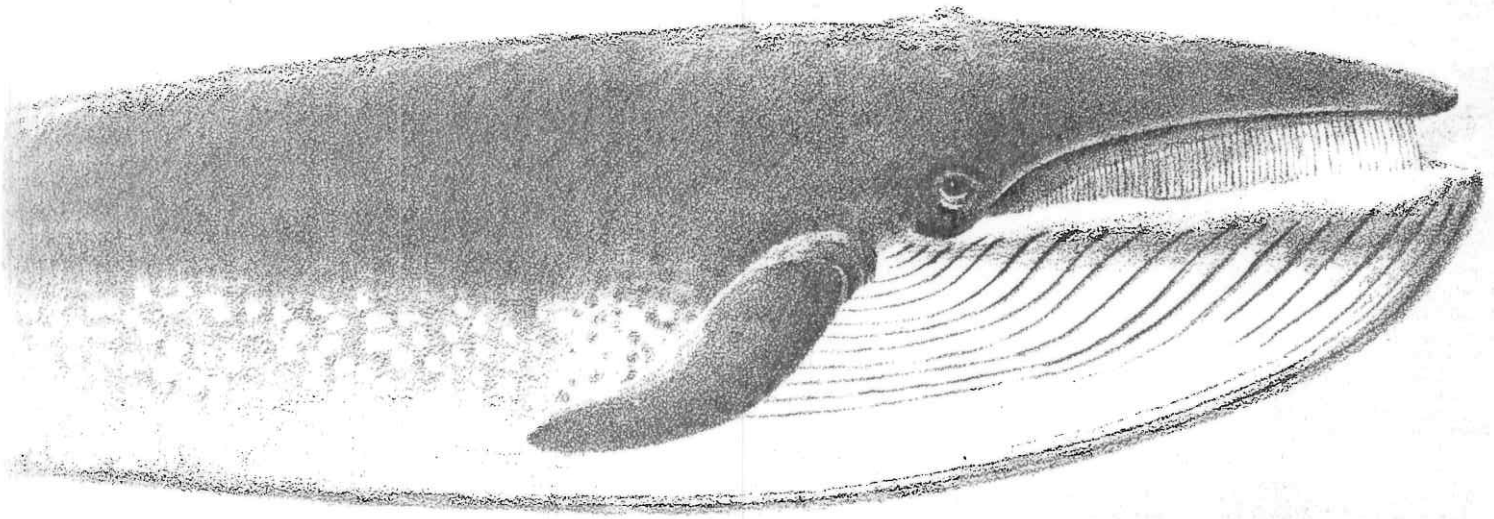


OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA

MAY - JUNE 1982



OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA

STATE OF CALIFORNIA
Edmund G. Brown Jr., Governor

MAY-JUNE

Vol. 43, No. 3

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(USPS 415460)
ISSN 0030-7025

PUBLISHED BIMONTHLY BY THE
CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF FISH AND GAME
Resources Building, 1416 Ninth Street
Sacramento, California 95814
Second Class postage paid at Sacramento, CA

OUTDOOR CALIFORNIA can be subscribed to for \$4
per year from the
Publications Section, P.O. Box 1015
North Highlands, California 95660.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to
Publications Section, P.O. Box 1015
North Highlands, CA 95660.

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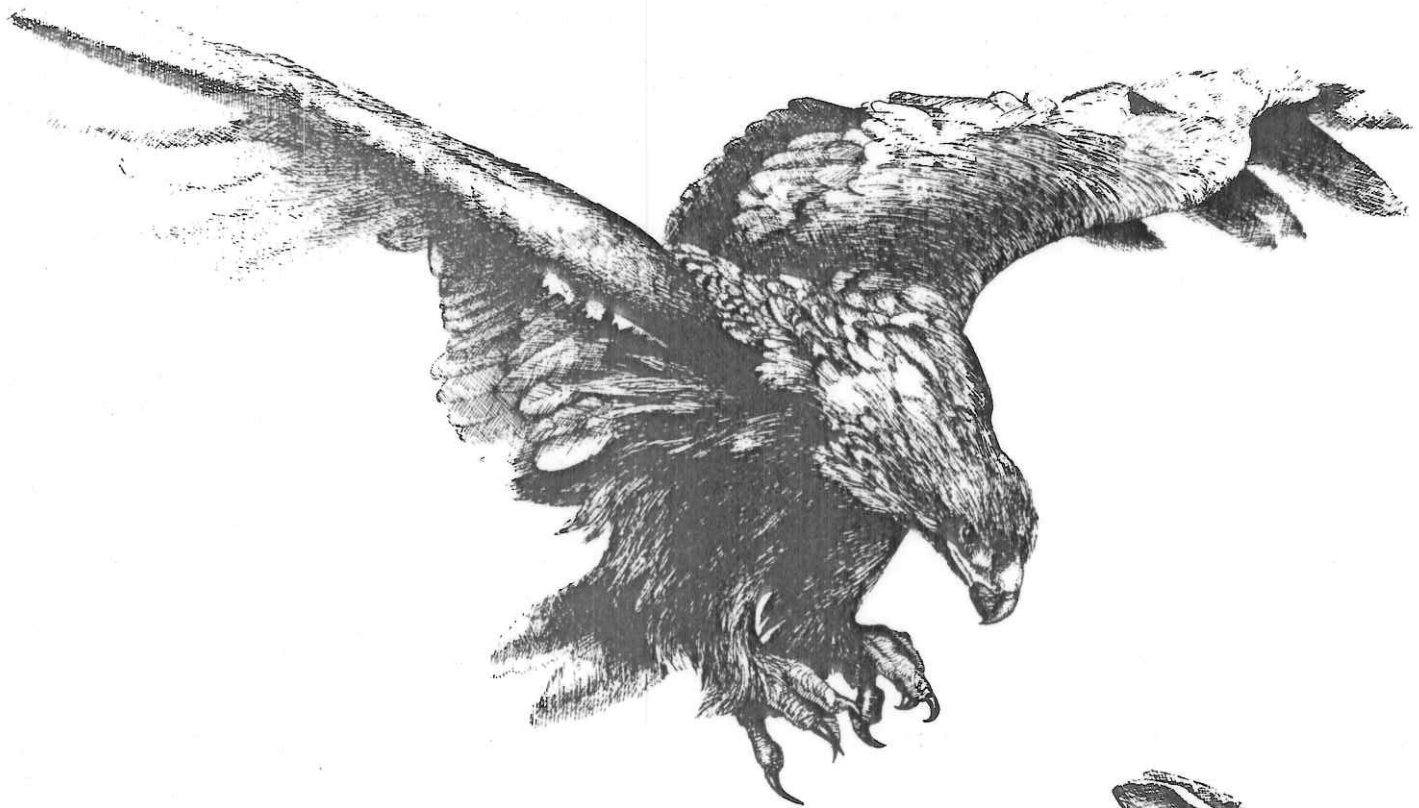
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Why the golden eagle is not endangered

In this, the bicentennial year of the selection of the bald eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus* as our national bird and symbol, that other eagle probably should get some publicity as well.

That other eagle, of course, is the golden eagle, *Aquila chrysaetos*. Roughly the same size as the bald eagle, the golden eagle is probably one of the most powerful avian predators in the world. While the bald eagle is restricted in its

distribution to North America, the golden eagle ranges as far south as North Africa and the Himalayas in the Old World, and Mexico in America.

In adult plumage, both eagles are distinct. However, as immature birds they are often mistaken for each other. It's this case of mistaken identity that may have resulted in great numbers of bald eagles being shot, because they were thought to be golden eagles.

Golden eagles will prey on lambs occasionally. However, such depredation is generally situation-specific and not as widespread nor as devastating to the livestock industry as often reported. In most situations where eagles are undisturbed and their habitat supports abundant natural prey, eagles will not be serious predators of lambs. In some isolated instances, range conditions and livestock management practices invite depredation by the golden eagle. Eagles also will not hesitate to feed on animals which have died on the range or been killed by other predators.

The conflict between golden eagles and sheep ranchers has raged over several years. Great shooting campaigns in the past have gained much notoriety, but lately, things seem a little quieter. That is not to say that shooting of both golden and bald eagles does not still occur. Unfortunately, the problem is still with us, although it does not receive as much publicity as in the past.

The problem of eagles being shot was of concern to the U.S. Congress when it enacted the Bald Eagle Act of 1945 to protect our national bird. Due to the aforementioned instances of mistaken identity as young birds, golden eagles also received protection under the Bald Eagle Act.

Since that landmark legislation to protect our national bird, the bald eagle has fallen on hard times. The effects of pesticides in the environment, particularly DDT, have caused the decline of a number of winged predators, including the now endangered or threatened bald eagle. But golden eagles have escaped a similar fate. Why? Well, it has to do with the different food habits of the two species.

Bald eagles have a largely fish and fowl diet, while the golden eagle preys on rabbits, ground squirrels and other small mammals, supplemented with carrion and some birds. Pesticide residues have accumulated in fish and birds to a greater extent than in mammals. As a result, any avian



predator which eats fish or birds suffers harmful changes in its metabolism; these changes cause reproductive failures because of eggshell thinning and the breaking or dehydrating of eggs during incubation.

Bald eagle numbers have declined throughout the United States, but the birds still are plentiful in Alaska and parts of the Pacific Northwest. California's bald eagle population is showing the earliest signs of recovery—a decade after most use of DDT was banned in the United States.

While the bald eagles were suffering from the effects of uncontrolled pesticide use, bald and golden eagles endured more direct forms of mortality. Eagles were shot, electrocuted, poisoned, trapped and killed in collisions with manmade structures. Humans disturbed their nest sites and occasionally harassed eagles to the point that the birds abandoned their territories. However, the golden eagle seemed to absorb these new mortality factors with little noticeable effect on its numbers. Thus, it maintains a breeding population of roughly 44,000 birds in the western United States today.

Recent changes in policy in the United States Department of Interior could represent a threat to the golden eagle, as well as other species. Much of the preferred habitat of the golden eagle in the western United States is also prime real estate for exploration for energy and mineral resources. Thus, the golden eagle finds itself in the unenviable position of being an obstruction to progress. Also, due to the contention by sheep ranchers that golden eagles are responsible for significant losses of their livestock, the bird may be persecuted and harassed to a greater extent than ever before by ranchers and animal damage control agents of the federal government.

A government proposal has been made to allow lethal control of golden eagles suspected of livestock depredation. Various means of non-lethal control have been tried in the past, with limited success. These methods included various kinds of harassment or removing the birds. But the root of the depredation problem concerns the methods of range and livestock management on the affected sheep ranches. Some methods will encourage eagle depredations,

Eagles in everyday life

Whether in the window of a government office building, on a coin in your pocket or decorating a local dining room, symbols of the bald eagle can be found almost anywhere. Is any other wild animal so engrained in American culture as the national bird? Photos by Trey Bonetti.



others will not. As long as the root of the problem remains, any effort to control eagles—by lethal or non-lethal methods—will fail, and more and more eagles will suffer.

Our nation is blessed with two magnificent species of eagles. Despite everything humans have done, both eagles are still with us today. The case of the bald eagle is more critical; however, there are some signs of recovery. The golden eagle continues to do well throughout most of the West. In many ways it epitomizes all that we associate with the landscape of places like Wyoming, Utah and Montana.

Will we have the wisdom to ensure the continued existence of this precious natural heritage?

Only the future will tell. In 200 years, will our national bird still be in existence? And what of the golden eagle? Will we drive it from its western domain in our hurry to exploit all that is exploitable for short-term gains?

There are two possible paths to the future: On one path we learn from our past mistakes and recognize our natural heritage is not something to mortgage for short-term profits, but rather to nurture, cherish, and lovingly pass on for future generations to enjoy. On the other path, we are quick to respond to pressures of the moment and view wildlife as a luxury, somehow apart from the natural system which also includes humans. In this future, the bald eagle could very well be extinct,

and the golden eagle could be greatly reduced and replace the bald eagle on the endangered species list.

Would we then proclaim this magnificent golden eagle as our new national bird and symbol, or more fittingly and ironically, when viewed from the historical perspective of the debate over the choice of our original national bird, would we choose something more durable and immune to the whims of human activity—a domestic turkey, for example? Let's hope this bird is not a better symbol of our wisdom about environmental issues. #

Ronald W. Schlorff is a wildlife biologist with the DFG's nongame wildlife section. Artwork by Narca Moore-Craig.