
Bald Eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Aves — Falconiformes — Accipitridae

CONSERVATION STATUS / CLASSIFICATION

Rangewide: Apparently secure (G4)
Statewide: Vulnerable breeding/Apparently secure nonbreeding (S3B,S4N)
ESA: Threatened
USFS: Region 1 No status; Region 4: Threatened
BLM: Threatened, Endangered, Proposed, and Candidate (Type 1)
IDFG: Threatened

BASIS FOR INCLUSION

Threatened under the U.S. Endangered Species Act; regional threats.

TAXONOMY

Two subspecies were classified in the late 1800s, representing northern and southern specimens (Buehler 2000), but these have not been recognized since before 1978 when the species was listed under the Endangered Species Act (ESA).

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE

The Bald Eagle occurs across the northern U.S. and into the Canadian provinces from Alaska and the Pacific Northwest to Newfoundland and the northeastern U.S., south locally to Arizona, New Mexico, Texas, and Florida. It is less common in the North American interior, although breeding sites have been documented in almost all of the lower 48 states. This species winters throughout much of its breeding range except the most northern portion. In Idaho, Bald Eagle nests are concentrated in 3 areas – eastern Idaho along the Snake River, northern Idaho within the Pend Oreille River drainage and Kootenai Valley, and on and around Cascade Reservoir in west–central Idaho (Sallabanks 2005). Rangewide, the Bald Eagle population is increasing. As of 1998 there were an estimated 5750 occupied breeding areas in the U.S. (USFWS 1999b). In Idaho, 156 nest sites were occupied in 2004 (Sallabanks 2005).

POPULATION TREND

Overall, the Bald Eagle population has increased substantially since the 1970s (and the ban on DDT; Buehler 2000). Regional populations in the northwest, Great Lakes, Chesapeake Bay, and Florida have increased 5–fold in the past 20 years. In addition to increases in numbers, Bald Eagles are reappearing in areas once unoccupied (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 1999). In Idaho, the number of active nest sites has increased almost 5–fold in the last 20 years (Sallabanks 2005).

HABITAT AND ECOLOGY

Bald Eagles are associated with aquatic ecosystems, including lakes, rivers, coastlines, marshes, and reservoirs. They feed primarily on fish, but the diet also includes

waterfowl, carrion, and small mammals. More nomadic than migratory, eagles move to open water in fall and winter, often concentrating with other eagles near wintering waterfowl or fish kills. Typically breeding in forested areas adjacent to large bodies of water, Bald Eagles exhibit mate and breeding site fidelity, and historical nest sites may be used continually by successive pairs. Immature eagles take 4–5 years to gain the white head for which this bird is named, and wander extensively during that time before attempting to breed (Buehler 2000).

THREATS

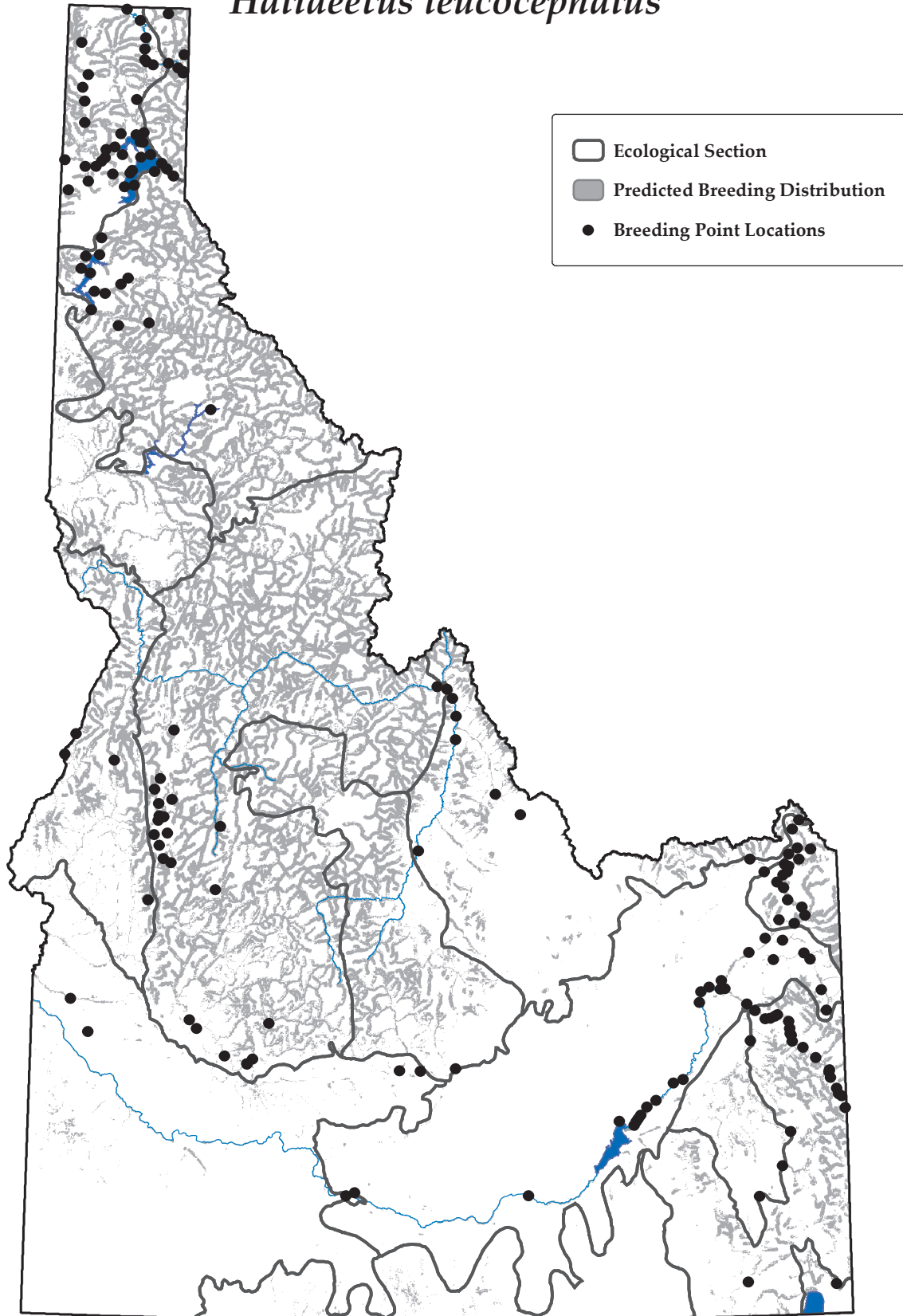
Although DDT is no longer used in the U.S., high levels of organochlorine compounds, including DDE and other insecticides sprayed for mosquito control or on crops, continue to pose a risk in some areas of the country (Buehler 2000). These problems have thus far been localized geographically. Shooting, poisoning, and electrocution still occur, although incidences are less common than in past decades. Although unlikely to be a problem in Idaho for many decades, habitat availability and protection could become an issue in some regions of the U.S. as an expanding eagle population encounters accelerated rates of human development (Fraser et al. 1996). Perhaps the greatest threat to birds in Idaho is disturbance during the nesting period from activities such as forestry (e.g., timber harvest operations), human recreation (e.g., hiking, boating, off-road vehicles, hunting), and construction projects (e.g., home-site development in forested areas overlooking lakes and other large bodies of water) (Buehler 2000).

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

This species has a long history of legal protection. It was first listed in 1940 under the Bald Eagle Protection Act in response to shooting for the feather trade and poisoning, then listed as Endangered in the lower 48 states in 1967 under the Endangered Species Preservation Act. DDT was banned in the U.S. in 1972, in part because of detrimental effects on Bald Eagle productivity. The species was listed under the current ESA in 1978. Subsequent population growth resulted in reclassification to Threatened in 1995 throughout the lower 48 states, and the species was proposed for removal from the Endangered Species List in 1999. There are 5 recovery regions in the U.S., each with a recovery plan and recovery criteria. In Idaho, as of the 2004 nesting season, recovery population goals have been met or exceeded in most Bald Eagle management zones, even when excluding numbers of breeding pairs in neighboring states that share the same zone with Idaho (Sallabanks 2005). A number of nest sites have management plans identifying home ranges, important perch and roost sites, and site-specific management issues (Kimball and Bechard 2002). Nest monitoring in Idaho should continue on an annual basis, especially after delisting (assumed to occur in the next 1–2 years) and eagle protection is essentially weakened. Buffer zones around active nests should be strictly adhered to as recommended in site-specific management plans. Disturbance around nest sites should be minimized or avoided altogether, especially during late-winter/early-spring when eagles are initiating territory establishment and breeding activities.

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Map created on September 22, 2005
and prepared by Idaho Conservation Data Center.
Sources: Point data are from Idaho Conservation Data Center,
Idaho Department of Fish and Game (2005). Predicted distribution
is from the Wildlife Habitat Relationships Models (WHR),
A Gap Analysis of Idaho: Final Report. Idaho Cooperative Fish
and Wildlife Research Unit, Moscow, ID (Scott et al. 2002).
Predicted distribution is approximate (for more information, go to
http://www.wildlife.uidaho.edu/idgap/idgap_report.asp).

