

Wildlife Express

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EAGLES

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Bald Eagle: © Uryadnikov Sergey for Adobe Stock

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EAGLES OF NORTH AMERICA AND THE WORLD

There are nearly 70 species of eagles in the world. They are powerful predators and are considered the top of the food chain. Eagles offer cultural and societal symbols. Their strength and intelligence are exceptional.

Although eagles are widely admired, they are also vulnerable. They have long breeding cycles and reproduce slowly, which makes it harder for their populations to recover. Eagles face several risks, including habitat loss and damage, illegal shooting, and poisoning. Because of these risks, at least half of all eagle species worldwide are protected.

Four species of eagles can be found in North America. Bald eagles and golden eagles are found across the country. Two other eagles, the Steller's sea eagle and the white-tailed eagle are sometimes found in the far islands of Alaska. They travelled to Alaska from the coasts of eastern Asia. These birds are sometimes known as vagrants. A vagrant is an animal wandering outside its range.

In Idaho, only the bald and golden eagles are found. Both are a sight to see!

Steller's sea eagle: © Devendra for Adobe Stock # 288278463

bald eagle: © Harry Collins for Adobe Stock

golden eagle: © Wendy Miller for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

white-tailed eagle: CC-BY Susanne Nilsson at Flickr.com

Steller's sea eagle
Haliaeetus pelagicus



bald eagle
Haliaeetus leucocephalus



golden eagle
Aquila chrysaetos

white-tailed eagle, *Haliaeetus albicilla*



BALD EAGLE



Most people are familiar with the bald eagle. Its large size, brown body, and white head and tail make it easy to recognize. Adult eagles also have yellow eyes, a yellow bill and yellow non-feathered legs/feet with black talons.

Juvenile bald eagles have dark brown heads and bodies with white streaking until they reach their fifth year. Young bald eagles are often mistaken for golden eagles because of this. The next time you see a bald eagle with a white head, know that it's been around for more than four years! The white head also signifies reproductive maturity.

Bald eagles are the second largest bird of prey in North America. With a six-to seven-foot wingspan, it's no wonder! Only the California condor is larger. Its wingspan is nearly nine feet.






Females and males look similar, but the female is nearly thirty percent larger. The female's massive size allows her to protect the nest and incubate the eggs. The smaller male is more agile for efficient hunting and flying. He will provide food for the female and the eaglets.

Idaho is a great place for these birds to hunt and raise their young. Eagles live in forested areas near water. The tall trees provide nesting and roosting opportunities. Open areas nearby also provide places to hunt. Many of Idaho's lakes and rivers provide the habitat bald eagles need. The water provides fish, the bald eagle's favorite food.

Eagles will also eat ducks, rabbits, muskrats and dead animals, called carrion. These are important sources of food, when the waterways ice over and the eagles cannot fish.



Bald eagle populations tend to increase in Idaho in the winter months. Migrant bald eagles from Canada show up as early as October and will nest along lakes and riverbanks later in the year.

You and your family have a good chance to see bald eagles when you visit lakes and rivers across the state of Idaho.



GOLDEN EAGLE

This is a species of greatest conservation need in Idaho!

The majestic golden eagle lives in the open country and canyonlands of the western United States. Like the bald eagle, it is a very large bird of prey with a wingspan of just over six feet. In Idaho, it is a species of greatest conservation need, meaning they need special attention to help keep their populations healthy.

Golden eagles are known for being powerful, fast and very acrobatic when they fly. This helps them find food in the large open spaces where they live.

Golden eagles get their name from the golden feathers on the back of their head and neck. The rest of their body is brown. Unlike most birds of prey, golden eagles have feathers on their legs, all the way down to their toes!



Photo: CC-BY golden-eagle-snake-river-gorge-aldis-garsvo-public-domain
for U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service



Golden Eagle: © Shutterstock #2222003853

Their favorite food is jackrabbits. Golden eagles also eat other rabbits, hares, ground squirrels and carrion. These birds have even been seen hunting on the ground, wildly flapping their wings as they run! Another hunting trick is to work together with a mate. One eagle distracts, the other captures.

These predators soar overhead looking for food. When it spies a jackrabbit, the eagle will dive to catch it. Scientists have clocked the speed of a golden eagle dive at nearly 200 miles per hour!

Golden eagles also are known for their “sky-dancing.” This is where they perform a series of up to 20 steep dives, swoops and flaps. Goldens will engage in aerial play with objects in the sky, as well.

Next time you visit Idaho’s wide-open spaces, keep an eagle eye out for golden eagles dancing in the sky!



NEST SWEET NEST

Birds do many amazing things. One of those things is nest building. Using their feet, beaks and bodies, birds can make sturdy nests out of simple things like sticks, grass and mud.

Bald eagles build their nests in large trees capable of holding their oversized nest. Golden eagles will build a nest on rocky ledges or cliff faces.

An eagle nest is sometimes referred to as an aerie (AIR-ee) or eyrie. They can be five to six feet wide and two to four feet deep! Mature

eagles are large, and the eaglets need plenty of space for growing!

Eagles mate for life and return to the same nest every year. Each year they do an upgrade on their nest to get it ready to raise their babies. If one of the eagles does not return, most eagles will accept a new mate.

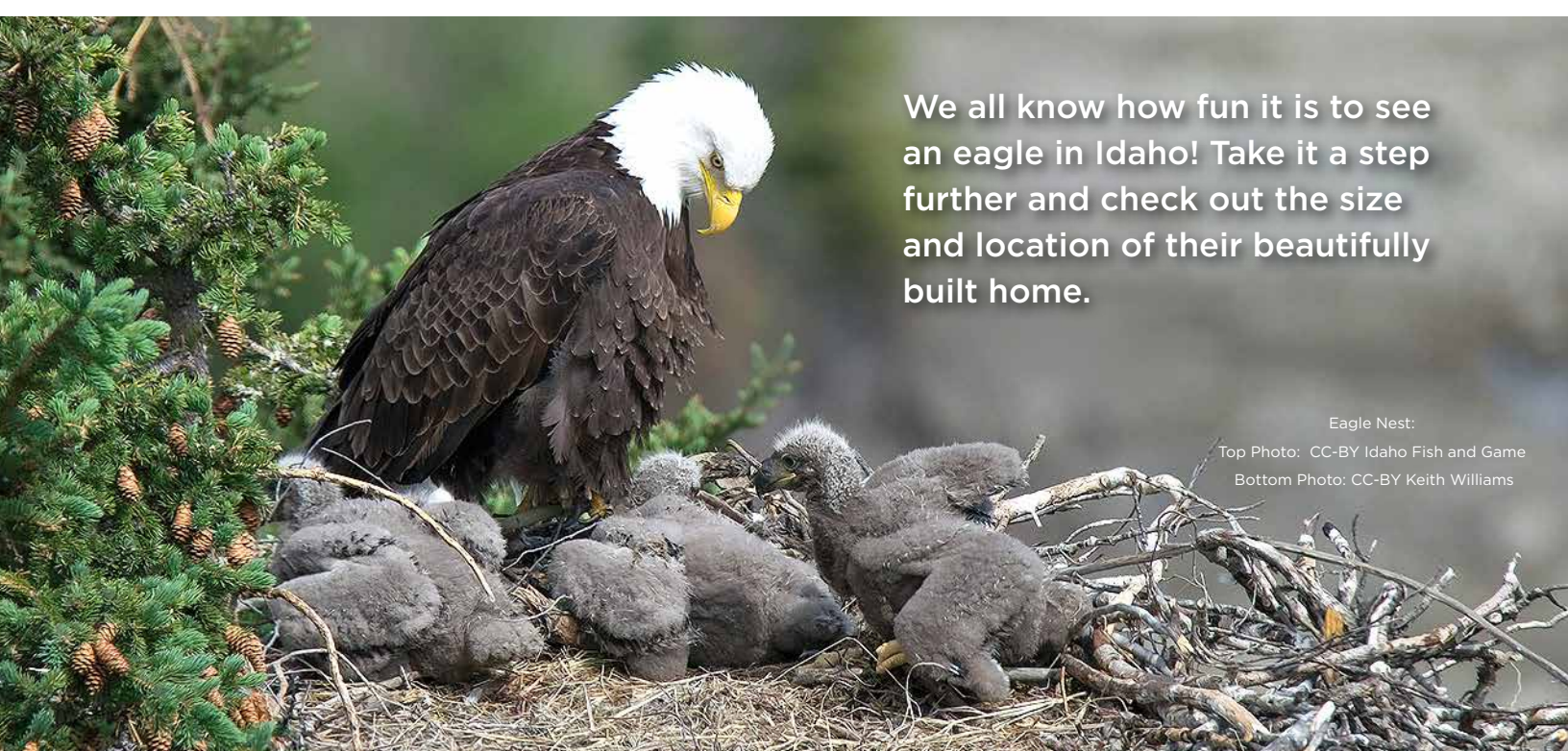
Both eagles work on fixing up the nest before the eggs are laid.

A pair of bald eagles in California recently broke a record. Each eagle brought nearly 25 sticks to add to the nest in one day! Much fussing took place to get it just right! To learn more about this amazing pair of eagles Google this website:

Big Bear Bald Eagle Nest 2025
Friends of Big Bear Valley

Many of these nests are so well made that they last for years. Sometimes the nest will get so heavy, it will break down the tree. An eagle's nest can weigh as much as a car!

The bottom of the nest is lined with moss, leaves, animal fur and other soft materials. It is ready for the female to lay her eggs!



We all know how fun it is to see an eagle in Idaho! Take it a step further and check out the size and location of their beautifully built home.

Eagle Nest:

Top Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Bottom Photo: CC-BY Keith Williams



AN EAGLE GROWS UP

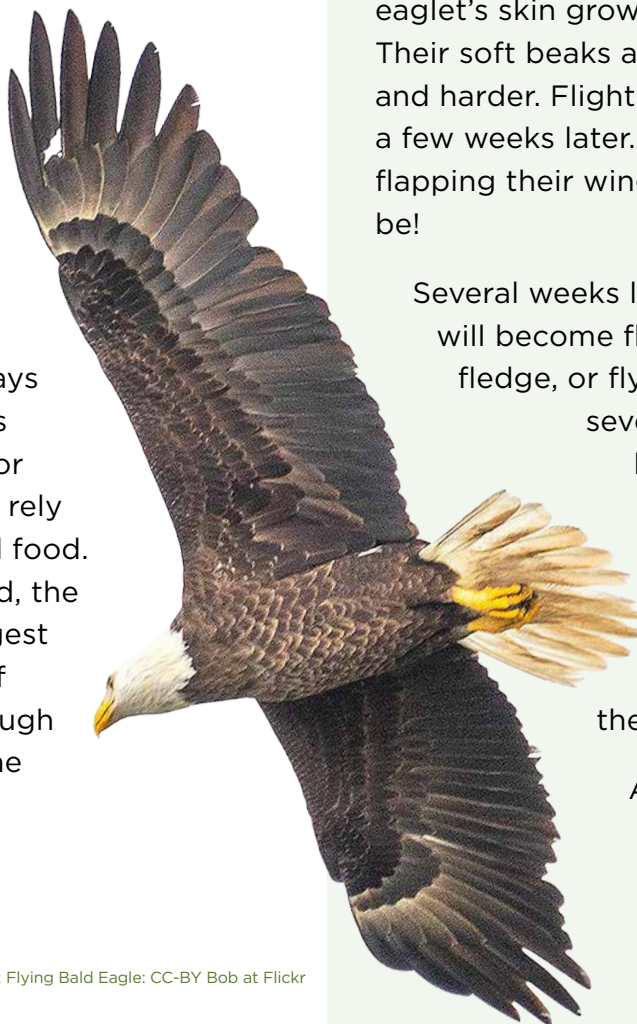
Female eagles in Idaho begin laying their eggs in early March. One to three eggs are laid in the nest. The eggs are not laid at all the same time. This is called asynchronous egg laying. Eggs are laid 3-6 days apart.

The female will begin incubating when the first egg is laid. Eggs will hatch at different times, each requiring about 35 days to develop (for bald eagles and up to 10 days longer for golden eagles). Hatchlings rely on parents for warmth and food. As you might have guessed, the first hatchling is the strongest and has the best chance of survival. If there is not enough food, only one or two of the hatchlings will survive.

Young eagles are called eaglets. They grow rapidly and will spend over three months at the nest. During the first few weeks, the eaglet's skin grows thick, soft white down. Their soft beaks and talons become stronger and harder. Flight feathers begin to grow a few weeks later. By week five, they are flapping their wings. What a ruckus it must be!

Several weeks later these young eaglets will become fledglings! This means they fledge, or fly out of the nest. After several awkward flights to branches near the nest, they leave the nest for longer flights. They remain dependent on the adults for several weeks to months before they leave the nest for good.

An eagle's life span in the wild averages 25 to 30 years.





EAGLES IN U.S. HISTORY

Many years ago in the United States, people noticed that eagle numbers were dropping. Bald eagles had become rare.

In the early 1900s, bald eagles and other raptors were shot by people who misunderstood birds of prey. They saw eagles and hawks as a threat to their farm animals. Some people even thought that eagles could catch and carry away a small child!

People also began to take away eagle habitat. Forests were cleared of the big trees that eagles needed for nests. People built homes around lakes and along rivers where eagles lived. America's eagle population began to drop.

In 1940, bald eagles were protected from shooting by the Bald Eagle Protection Act, but people continued to take away habitat. Worse

yet, they started to use a pesticide called DDT. DDT is a chemical used to kill insects. It can also be harmful to other animals, including eagles and people. When DDT was sprayed on crops, it often washed into streams and rivers. It was taken up by plants and then moved up the food chain as one animal ate another. When an eagle ate a fish, it was eating large amounts of DDT. Some eagles got so sick that they died. DDT also made the eagle's eggshells very thin. The eggs cracked easily when the parent birds sat on them. The developing eaglets were killed. All over the United States, young eagles were not hatching. With



no young eagles surviving, eagle numbers decreased.

In 1967 bald eagles were added to the Endangered Species List in most parts of the United States.

Fortunately, many people wanted to help eagles. Scientists worked to protect and restore eagle habitat. The pesticides that hurt eagles were no longer used.

Eagle populations increased and in 2007, the bald eagle was taken off the Endangered Species List. While it is still not a common bird, bald eagles are doing much better.

Today, one of the biggest dangers to golden eagles is power lines. Unfortunately, the eagles can get electrocuted when they land on the power lines or poles. To prevent this problem, scientists and power companies, like Idaho Power, worked together. They developed special raptor-safe poles to help eagles and other hawks safely perch on power lines or power poles.

Like bald eagles, golden eagles are protected animals. They were added to the Bald Eagle Protection Act in 1962. This act is now called the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Under this law and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, it is prohibited to kill, sell or possess eagles without a permit. This means that if you see an eagle feather, or other body part, you should not take it home with you.

In 2024, Congress passed a law that officially named the bald eagle as our national symbol. Although it has been used extensively for a few hundred years on many things, including presidential flag, military insignias, coins and dollars, it was never officially named as the national symbol.





EAGLE EYES

Good eyesight is important for birds of prey. These hunters can spot prey from long distances and keep it in focus until it is caught.

Like most predators, birds of prey have eyes that face forward, just like yours. Both eyes look at something at the same time. This is called binocular vision.

Raptors can also see things off to the side by using their right or left eye by itself. This is called monocular vision. You can have monocular vision by covering one eye. Because raptors have both binocular and monocular vision, they have two well-focused side views and one well-focused front view all at the same time.

Large numbers of special cells called cones are grouped together to form foveae (FOE-vee). These foveae give the bird very sharp vision. They also let the bird see color.

Birds of prey have two kinds of foveae. The central foveae provide sharp monocular vision on either side of the bird. Temporal foveae give the bird sharp binocular vision when looking straight ahead. Together, these foveae give birds of prey excellent vision.

When an eagle hunts from a high perch or up in the air, this is a big advantage. Birds of prey are also able to focus their eyes very quickly. The lens of the eye and the shape of the eye can change very rapidly, keeping objects in focus.

A golden eagle diving to capture a jackrabbit can keep its prey in clear focus from the time it spots the prey until the prey is caught and a bald eagle can see a fish from a mile away!

Eyes are another amazing adaptation that eagles possess.



CRITTER COUNTING

Scientists and volunteers have spent many hours counting bald eagles across the country. This information helps wildlife managers know if bald eagle numbers are going up, down or staying the same.

In Northern Idaho near Coeur d'Alene, EagleWatch has kept records from November to February for many years.

When weather permits, eagle counts are done weekly. Most recently in December 2025, the numbers of eagles counted has ranged from 112-115 adults and 36 - 42 juvenile bald eagles. You can see the numbers from the previous weeks and years on the BLM website. One of the things that brings bald eagles to this location is kokanee salmon.

Eagles thrive on these fish, a cousin to the sockeye salmon. Bald eagles are not the only animals being counted in Idaho. Keeping track of the number of animals helps scientists understand population trends. Many times, wildlife biologists must look at populations rather than individuals.

Drones are sometimes used to count Chinook and sockeye salmon nests in the streams and rivers. Snow machines, snowshoes and even

skis come in handy for doing winter snow-track surveys for Canada lynx, wolverine and fisher. Rafts, canoes and kayaks come in handy for doing river surveys to count waterfowl and fish.



Counting animals is an important aspect of the management of them. Idaho Fish and Game's mission is to protect, preserve, perpetuate and manage Idaho's wildlife resources for the benefit of all Idahoans.

One of the most famous animal counts is the Audubon Christmas Bird Count.

Started in 1900, the count lasts from December 14 – January 5. People all over North America pick one day during the count period. They spend that day counting and identifying all the birds they see.

The first year, 25 different counts occurred and 89 species of birds were recorded. In 2024, the count yielded 16,456 birds with more than 2000 species counted. The Christmas Bird Count has grown. It continues to attract bird watchers of all ages.

All this counting helps scientists understand if animal populations have changed. It can be a clue to a change in habitat. It might be a sign that animals are getting sick and dying. Animal counts can even alert scientists to problems that might be bad for people. Counts can also show good things like better habitat and healthy animals.

Would you like to help count animals? Many large counts are done mostly by volunteers. Google the following websites for more information and get your notebooks out! By doing so, you can call yourself a community scientist!

- Breeding Bird Survey
- Project FeederWatch
- Great Backyard Bird Count



WILDLIFE WATCHING IN WINTER



Observing winter wildlife makes for a great adventure. Animals like elk and deer often move into valleys and onto south-facing slopes to get away from deep snow and cold. This makes them easier to observe.

Birds flock to backyard feeders, letting you observe them from the comfort of home.

Tracks in fresh snow help you learn more about your wild neighbors. What you find might surprise you!

This winter, make it a priority to get to your closest eagle viewing location. Take note of places to observe eagles around the state. While our national symbol is found in Idaho year-round, migrating eagles increase Idaho's eagle population in the winter. These birds gather along rivers and large lakes where they hunt for fish and ducks. Sometimes you can see several hundred eagles gathered along the shoreline of a lake or roosting in a large tree--- what a spectacular sight!

For for places to observe these impressive creatures in Idaho Google Idaho's Top Eagle Watching Spots - Visit Idaho.

Whenever you observe wildlife, remember to be a responsible watcher. Wildlife in winter needs to conserve as much energy as possible to survive until spring.

Be careful not to approach wildlife too closely. Use binoculars or a spotting scope for a better view. Observe from a safe distance and stay in your car. Vehicles can be great blinds to hide yourself, so you do not disturb the animals you are watching.



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EAGLES

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to: lori.wilson@idfg.idaho.gov or Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707