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Eye on the Environment

Watching Wildlife – Bald Eagles Abound!

By Betsy Spettigue, Swan Ecosystem Center

Driving up the Swan Valley this winter, I've enjoyed seeing bald eagles feeding, perching and soaring over mountains and meadows. Observing these magnificent birds in their natural habitat adds to my delight living here. Winter is a great time to watch eagles!

On blue sky days, I watch bald eagles soaring on thermals and winds above the valley. When the sky is grey, they may perch in trees watching for fish in the Swan River if fly from one perch to the next looking for food. Yet the real indicator of a meal is the flapping of raven wings and their distinct calls. Bald eagles visually cue on this because they have learned food is available.

Eagles are bigger, bolder and maybe hungrier than those ravens. When an eagle arrives at a feeding site, ravens flutter back, share the bounty and eat bits of food found farther away. This changing of the "guard" doesn't come without some challenges by hungry birds, yet invariably the eagle rules the feast until it's full.

Some of the most opportune viewing comes by driving along Highway 83 and watching for these visual cues yourself. With a white head and tail contrasting with a dark brown body, the adult bald eagle is unmistakable.



Two young bald eagles perched together in the spring snow. Notice the dark coloring with white mottling typical of a young bald eagle. Photo by Caroline Jenkins for the Pathfinder.

Young bald eagles are much less distinct, being dark brown overall with some white mottling.

Sometimes people mistake young bald eagles with golden eagles – it's an easy mistake to make. Yet with a closer look, you can usually see the distinct golden feathers on the head and shoulders of the golden eagle.

The best way I can tell a young bald eagle from a golden is their overall look. The young bald eagle appears disheveled, feathers ruffled up, while the golden eagle's feathers look sleek, and more regal, even on a road-kill.



*This mature bald eagle was spotted in Seeley Lake. This white head and tail of an adult bald eagle takes 4-5 years to develop.
Photo by Caroline Jenkins for the Pathfinder.*

Remember to take care when observing wildlife along the highway – for your personal safety and concern for wildlife feeding so near the road. Obviously, dead deer and other wildlife provide an easy food source, but often at a price. The eagles become so full of food that they must fly down the highway, the only clearing in the woods, to get up to speed.

As they slowly gain altitude, they often flare away from or collide with vehicles coming down the road. Injured birds are taken to wildlife rehabilitators, who treat them and nurse them back to health. Some of these eagles do not recover from their injuries well enough to be released back into the wild.

We're fortunate to have bald eagles in Montana. Bald eagles are the only fish eagle that lives throughout most of North America. Historically, their population was estimated to be between 300,000 to 500,000 in the early 1700's. By the 1950's, there were only 412 nesting pairs in the lower 48 states.

DDT, a powerful and long-lasting pesticide, was used to protect crops from insects after World War II. Unfortunately, DDT killed more than pests. Fish and birds began dying after eating insects treated with DDT. Eagles were affected when they ate dead fish or other birds. DDT caused eagles to lay thin-shelled eggs. The eggs broke under the weight of female eagles as they tried to incubate them. In 1972, the United States banned DDT and by 1978, bald eagles were classified as endangered in Montana.

In 1980, the number of breeding pairs of bald eagles totaled 25 in Montana. Bald eagle populations have been increasing ever since. By 1994, Montana was home to the 7th largest bald eagle breeding population. The bald eagle was officially de-listed on June 28, 2007. Biologists checked 490 known bald eagle territories and counted 428 young successfully fledging from their nests in 2008.

Some bald eagles remain throughout the winter, and many are *residents*. Nearly 500 birds are recorded annually during the mid-winter bald eagle count in Montana, which includes some migrating eagles that stay the winter and head north again in springtime. Still, many bald eagles, known as *migrants*, travel south in the fall when the northern rivers and lakes freeze over.

Large groups of eagles can be found near dams or major rivers where the moving water does not freeze and food is available. The birds will eat most types of fish, caught alive or found dead. They eat many animals besides fish, including geese, ducks, rabbits and other small animals. Eagles are opportunistic feeders.

Starting as early as mid-February, eagles begin their northward migration back to Canada and Alaska. Thousands of eagles migrate through Montana, many along the Front Range where they get lift from winds and feed on ground squirrels, fresh out of hibernation. These eagles will nest and raise their young along coastlines, rivers and lakeshores.

In Montana, nesting sites are near forested lakes and rivers in areas with minimal disturbance. The area around the pair's nest is called a *territory*. Other eagles and birds are driven out of the area by the pair of nesting eagles. The sight of an approaching person or boat can cause the adult birds to leave the nest. When this happens, the eggs or young may become chilled and die. Please stay away from eagle nests.

From Clearwater Junction to the Swan Refuge, eight to ten bald eagle territories are occupied each year. The Seeley-Swan area has not been surveyed closely in recent years so there may be more.

Here's a way you can help. When you're out in the Clearwater or Swan drainages and see a big stick nest, report the location to Native Species biologists at Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP), or call the Swan Ecosystem Center so we can put you in touch with the right folks.

When you see road-killed animals near the highway, you can help prevent possible injuries to other wildlife, and especially eagles, by pulling the carcass farther off the highway. Some residents already do this and it does help!

If you see an injured eagle (or any type of bird or wildlife), report it to FWP. With the Grounded Eagle Foundation now closed, injured wildlife and eagles have two excellent wildlife rehabilitators available for treatment and care. To the north is Lynn Vaught (Wildlife Return at 406-253-6065 – Cell, in Whitefish). To the south is Sandy Stucky (406-550-4365 – Cell, in Missoula). Call anytime! Both these professionals are recommended by Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks.

Bald eagles were once rare in Montana and much of the United States. Today, their future is bright. Watching bald eagles and other wildlife adds richness to life. And yes, it's priceless!