

Bald Eagle

The bald eagle is the majestic symbol of our nation - of freedom, strength, hope. Once endangered, this impressive bird is no longer a rare sight in Nebraska. Many spend the winter in the state and there are nesting pairs near Lincoln.

The Nature Center bald eagle came to live with us in December 2003. As with most of the birds of prey we have on exhibit, it was entrusted to our care by Raptor Recovery, Nebraska. This non-profit organization rehabilitates injured raptors. If a bird's injuries are so severe they cannot be released, they are used as educational birds.



This female bald eagle was found in a ditch near Valley, Nebraska in the summer of 2003 with a fractured wing. The wing had to be amputated. Bald eagles take four or five years to attain their characteristic white heads and tails, solid dark bodies and wings, and yellow beaks and eyes. We had the opportunity to watch as it acquired its mature coloration.

Bald eagles are LARGE with an average wingspan of 80", about the height of a basketball player. As a comparison, great horned owls have a wingspan of 44", red-tailed hawks 49", and turkey vultures 67". The average weight of a bald eagle is 9.5 pounds, three times heavier than a great horned owl and four times heavier than a red-tailed hawk. Half of an eagle's weight comes from muscle; their skeleton weighs about 8 ounces and their 7000 feathers only a pound. The eagle's talons (toes) are awe-inspiring - with 2 inch-long claws!

The diet of bald eagles is primarily fish, birds (particularly waterfowl), and small mammals. They often eat carrion. When swooping down to catch live prey they can attain speeds of over 100 miles per hour. The eyesight of the bald eagle is far sharper than that of a human - it is claimed that they can spot a rabbit on the ground from a distance of two miles. However, they are not as fierce as they seem, usually finding food among the weakened and dying. They are not above stealing dinner from other species and will grab a fish from the clutches of an osprey. When food is plentiful bald eagles tear it in pieces, swallow it, and store it in their crop. Like other raptors, they regurgitate pellets.

Seen most frequently by water, bald eagles are solitary while breeding but gregarious during winter. Large numbers that nest in the north migrate to Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri for the cold season. They roost together in areas with large trees. The Harlan County Reservoir can have 200 to 300 eagles using the area as winter habitat.

Bald eagles form long-term pair bonds. Their nests are, predictably, huge structures. Built high in a tree they are made of sticks and lined with leaves and grasses. The nests are often repaired and added to year after year. The largest reported bald eagle nest measured almost 10 feet across, 20 feet deep, and weighed 2 tons!

In Nebraska breeding begins in March through mid-April. Established pairs nest earlier than younger birds. Aerial courtship can be spectacular as the birds lock talons and descend in somersaults. Females usually lay two eggs. The incubation period is over a month, and the eaglets do not fledge for another two to three months. Both parents hunt for food for their quickly growing young. Even after this lengthy period they depend on their parents for help in finding dinner.

Only half of all eaglet survive their first dangerous year. Those that make it can live 30 years, and often return to an area within 100 miles of where they were hatched for nesting.



Adopted as our national emblem in 1782, bald eagles once thrived in much of the United States and Canada. Many were shot in the 1800s and early 1900s – a bounty was offered for them as late as 1962 as they were considered a threat to domestic animals. The population was further depleted because logging and shore-line development destroyed habitat, and because widespread use of DDT and other pesticides weakened eggshells, reducing birth rates. In 1963 there were only 417 nesting pairs in the contiguous 48 states. The bald eagle was listed as an endangered species in 1978 and has recovered so well since then that it is being de-listed. The first successful nesting pair in Nebraska in over 100 years was recorded in 1993. In 2003, Nebraska reported 29 nesting pairs in 23 different counties. Their success story gives hope to those of us concerned with the declining numbers of far too many wildlife species.

