

ANNUAL REPORT

Avian Research Subsection Wildlife Research Section Fish and Wildlife Research Institute

Project: **9291-250-4070 -Annual Bald Eagle Surveys in Florida**

Contract: Bald Eagle Population Monitoring #06150

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Abstract: An annual statewide survey of a subsample of bald eagle nesting territories in Florida was conducted between December 2013 and May 2014. Surveys were flown using fixed-winged aircraft. All nesting and productivity data were compiled and analyzed to generate annual population estimates that are used to determine the Florida eagle population trend. The estimated number of active bald eagle nesting territories in Florida was approximately 1,499 (+/-21). This number is similar to the most recent surveys: 1,487 (+/-20) in 2013 and 1,511 (+/-24) in 2012. The productivity rates for 2014 were 0.9266 per active territory (n = 122) and 1.40 per successful nest (n = 85). The number of young produced in 2014 was estimated at 1,388. Polk and Osceola counties had the greatest number of active eagle nesting territories, and live pine trees are the most common nesting substrate for eagle nests in Florida. This data indicates that the number of nesting pairs of bald eagles in the state continues to exceed the minimum needed to meet the population goal. With the absence of a full survey in FY 2014-2015, these numbers will not be updated until the completion of the FY 2015-2016 breeding season.



INTRODUCTION

Florida supports one of the largest populations of breeding bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) in the 48 continental United States. About 70% of the occupied nesting territories in the Southeast U.S. are in Florida. As development of Florida's coastal and freshwater environments increases, the direct and indirect effects of pollution, habitat disturbance, and habitat loss on nesting eagles will accelerate. Bald eagles will be among the first species to respond to these impacts because of the avoidance by many eagles of human-developed areas as nesting sites. There is an ongoing need for knowing the locations of eagle nests for site and developmental planning by both the private sector and governmental agencies.

In 2006, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC), the Wildlife Foundation of Florida, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to establish a conservation fund for the management and conservation of the bald eagle in Florida. Specifically, this MOU provides funding for the FWC's aerial survey program to locate new and existing nests, manage and disseminate data for public use, and present the resulting data within the year the data were collected on the eagle website.

FWC staff and others have monitored bald eagle nesting territories in Florida since 1972. A nesting territory is defined as the area associated with one breeding pair of bald eagles which contains one or more nests (FWC 2008). Information gathered over 40 years includes the locations of over a thousand eagle nesting territories, breeding productivity, core nesting areas, reproductive success, and population estimates.

The USFWS Post-Delisting Monitoring Plan (USFWS 2007) recommends that bald eagle

nests be monitored every 5 years for three eagle generations (24 years) on a nationwide basis. Monitoring eagle nests and nesting territories in Florida at a five-year interval may not provide adequate information to verify that the Florida population is being maintained. Additionally, annual surveys provide information about the status of all known active and alternate eagle nests in the state, and provide a basis for declaring nests to be lost or abandoned. To ensure that the conservation objectives of this management plan are being maintained, the FWC recommends that annual surveying continue until 2032 (FWC 2008). In addition to acquiring current information about the status of eagle nests, biologists characterize the habitat and land-use changes within each nesting territory in Florida. This information may help to identify the factors that affect population changes, movement patterns, habitat changes, and other trends.

The primary objective of this project is to gather data on the location, activity status, and productivity of bald eagle nests in Florida as part of the FWC Bald Eagle Population Monitoring. These data can be used for the management and conservation of the eagle in Florida and to determine if the eagle population in Florida is experiencing a loss of nesting sites or reproductive suppression. The state approved the Bald Eagle Management Plan (BEMP) and removed the eagle from the state imperiled species list in April 2008. An implementation team was formed to work together to carry out the plan according to specific goals and objectives.

BEMP MONITORING

The continuation of FWC surveys of all known eagle nests and nesting territories is dependent on securing funding and resources. If funding or resources are limited, then the FWC may choose to survey only a sample of the eagle nests and nesting territories statewide annually, and to develop methods to estimate the overall population and productivity. Although we are capable of monitoring every nest in the state, we would be sacrificing some productivity data for information about nest status. The type of flying that is required to complete this survey is dangerous and flying multiple days in a row creates a situation that is not advisable. As the number of nests in the state increases, the harder it becomes to do a statewide annual survey. The sub-sample approach allows for a reduced survey while continuing to monitor the status of bald eagle nesting territories and productivity statewide on an annual basis.

BEMP CONSERVATION GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The goal of the BEMP is to establish conservation actions that will maintain a stable or increasing population of bald eagles in Florida in perpetuity. To achieve this goal, a decline of 10% of the number of eagle nesting territories in Florida over a period of 24 years (three eagle generations) must be prevented through science-based management, regulations, public education, and law enforcement. The FWC anticipates that without continued protection of eagle nesting habitats, the number of nesting territories in Florida could decline by 10% or more over the next 24 years, which could trigger a relisting effort. The FWC has therefore set a conservation goal for bald eagles that is higher than the minimum threshold to avoid a need for relisting.

Conservation objectives are benchmarks used to measure progress toward the conservation goal. The following conservation objectives have been met or exceeded in Florida, and maintaining these objectives will help to ensure that the conservation goal is sustained. Annual

nest surveys conducted by FWC biologists since 1972 provide the data used to establish the following objectives. Determining annual reproductive success will provide the information needed to monitor the population and to measure the success of the objectives. The FWC listing process has five criteria—three based on population size or trend, one on geographic range, and one on quantitative analysis of the probability of extinction (see Sullivan *et al.* 2006). The first three conservation objectives below provide a means by which changes in population size or trend can be detected, while the fourth objective is intended to ensure that the bald eagle maintains its current geographic distribution. Maintaining a stable or increasing population of eagles throughout their current distribution will ensure a healthy bald eagle population in Florida, and will prevent the need to relist eagles under FWC's imperiled-species regulations. The following conservation objectives will be calculated annually from five-year running averages, beginning with data collected during the period 2002–2006. We use five-year averages to avoid the possibility that one or two years of poor reproductive success might trigger a relisting effort. These numbers are subject to revision based on changes in monitoring data and/or methods.

1. Maintain a minimum of 1020 active territories per year over the next 24 years
2. Maintain an average of 68% of the active territories producing ≥ 1 nestling per year.
3. Maintain an average reproductive success of ≥ 1.5 fledglings per active nest over five years.
4. Maintain the current area of occupancy (>770 mi²) and extent of occurrence (52,979 mi²) of bald eagles statewide.

SURVEY OBJECTIVES

1. Complete an annual sub-sampling survey of newly reported, previously known, and potential locations of bald eagle nests in Florida.
2. Electronically enter and verify data on the locality and nest status in a format compatible with the FWC's Bald Eagle Nest Locator database.
3. Determine if we are meeting the objectives (1 and 2) of the Bald Eagle Management Plan (BEMP).

METHODS

A statewide survey of eagles was conducted during the 2013/2014 nesting season using fixed-winged aircraft. The survey protocol followed Nesbitt *et al.* (1990) and included the following specifications: airspeed 60-80 knots (111-120 kph), altitude 300-500 feet (90-150 m), distance >1000 feet (>300 m) from the nest to avoid disturbance, and no flights during inclement weather or winds >20 knots (37 kph).

The biologists verified nest locations with the use of a WAAS-enabled Global Positioning System (WGPS) unit. Locations were recorded in longitude and latitude to hundredths of a minute and stored and displayed in NAD83 datum. A system called "X Marks the Spot," developed by Dr. Paul Kubilis of the FWC, was employed to record the location of new nest sites. This method consists of flying over the nest from two separate directions at an angle >60 degrees and marking a waypoint over the nest with each pass. This technique provides three separate points (two waypoints and the crossing point of the two over-flights). This method necessitates

that the WGPS be capable of recording a flight log, and each flight must be downloaded before the next flight.

The following 8 categories of survey data was recorded by the biologists for each nest:

1. date,
2. observer,
3. nest number,
4. latitude and longitude,
5. status of nest (active, inactive, destroyed, etc.),
6. productivity (number of eggs, nestlings, fledglings),
6. species of nest tree,
7. condition of nest tree (alive, dead, damaged, etc.), and
8. observations (presence of adults, incubation, etc.).

This year was the sixth year of a new survey protocol based on a stratified sampling method with coverage of 1/3 of the known nests each year (Figure 1). Subsets of the known active nests were revisited to get a statewide production estimate. Using these data, an extrapolated population estimate was derived with the use of an algorithm based on data collected during the preceding 35 years of activity and production surveys. Any reported new nests were checked and we continued to locate previously unknown nesting territories by surveying areas in suitable habitat that was not covered or inadequately covered in previous surveys. All nesting and productivity data collected during this study will be compiled annually and analyzed to interpret population trends.

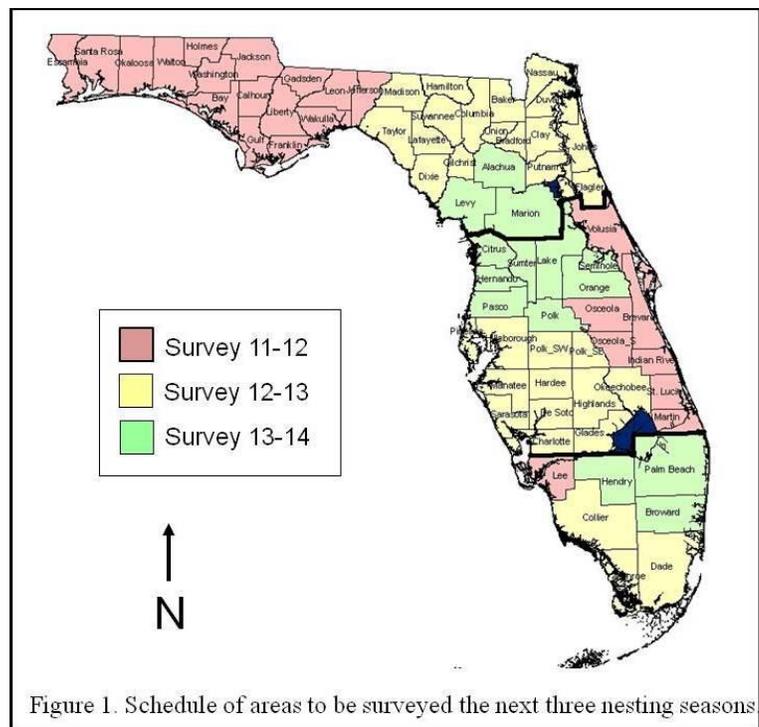


Figure 1. Schedule of areas to be surveyed the next three nesting seasons

RESULTS

The estimated number of active bald eagle nesting territories in Florida during the 2013/2014 statewide survey (excluding ENP) was 1,499 (+/-21) (Table 1, Figure 1). This number is similar to the most recent surveys: 1,487 (+/-20) in 2013 and 1,511 (+/-24) in 2012. The productivity rates for 2014 were 0.9266 per active territory (n = 122) and 1.40 per successful nest (n = 85). The number of young produced in 2014 was estimated at 1,388. The numbers of young per active territory and per successful nest were below the preceding 10 year and 5 year means, but number of active territories and numbers of young produced were above the preceding means

(Table 1).

There was no difference between the active nest counts observed in the counties in the 2014 sub-sampling panel than the active nest counts from the 2008 survey (the last statewide survey that was conducted prior to the survey redesign) (Figure 2).

DISCUSSION

This was the sixth year that we surveyed a subset of the known bald eagle nesting territories. Geographic distribution and substrate are being evaluated using five years of data and will be reported in a manuscript. The results of the survey indicate that the sub-sampling approach is adequate to address the management conservation objectives outlined in the Florida bald eagle management plan. We have met the BEMP conservation objectives this year.

The number of nesting pairs of bald eagles in Florida and their reproductive performance continues to exceed the minimum needed to meet regional population recovery goals. We should continue using the current sampling approach to monitor the population and we are currently evaluating this method using three years of data (one complete survey). In an effort to locate new nesting territories we continue to identify and inventory suitable habitats that have been inadequately surveyed in the past.

TABLES AND FIGURES

Table 1. Number of active bald eagle nest territories and productivity results for 2003-2012 and 2013.

Year	# Active	# Young Produced	Y / Active	Y / Successful
2004	1,092	1,318	1.14	1.54
2005	1,133	1,473	1.30	1.59
2006	1,166	1,527	1.31	1.52
2007	1,218	1,303	1.07	1.46
2008	1,278	1,495	1.17	1.60
2009*	1,340	1,796	1.34	1.62
2010*	1,362	1,796	1.31	1.59
2011*	1,457	1,355	0.93	1.47
2012*	1,511	1,756	1.16	1.46
2013*	1,487	1,340	0.90	1.57
Mean preceding	1,304	1,516	1.16	1.54
10 years (SD)	(151.18)	(199.52)	(0.16)	(0.06)
Mean preceding	1,431	1,609	1.13	1.54
5 years (SD)	(76.24)	(238.97)	(0.21)	(0.07)
2014*	1,499	1,388	0.92	1.40

* Numbers for 2009 - 2014 were estimated based on statistical analysis. Productivity was based on sampling protocol

which assumes simple random sampling of all active nesting territories

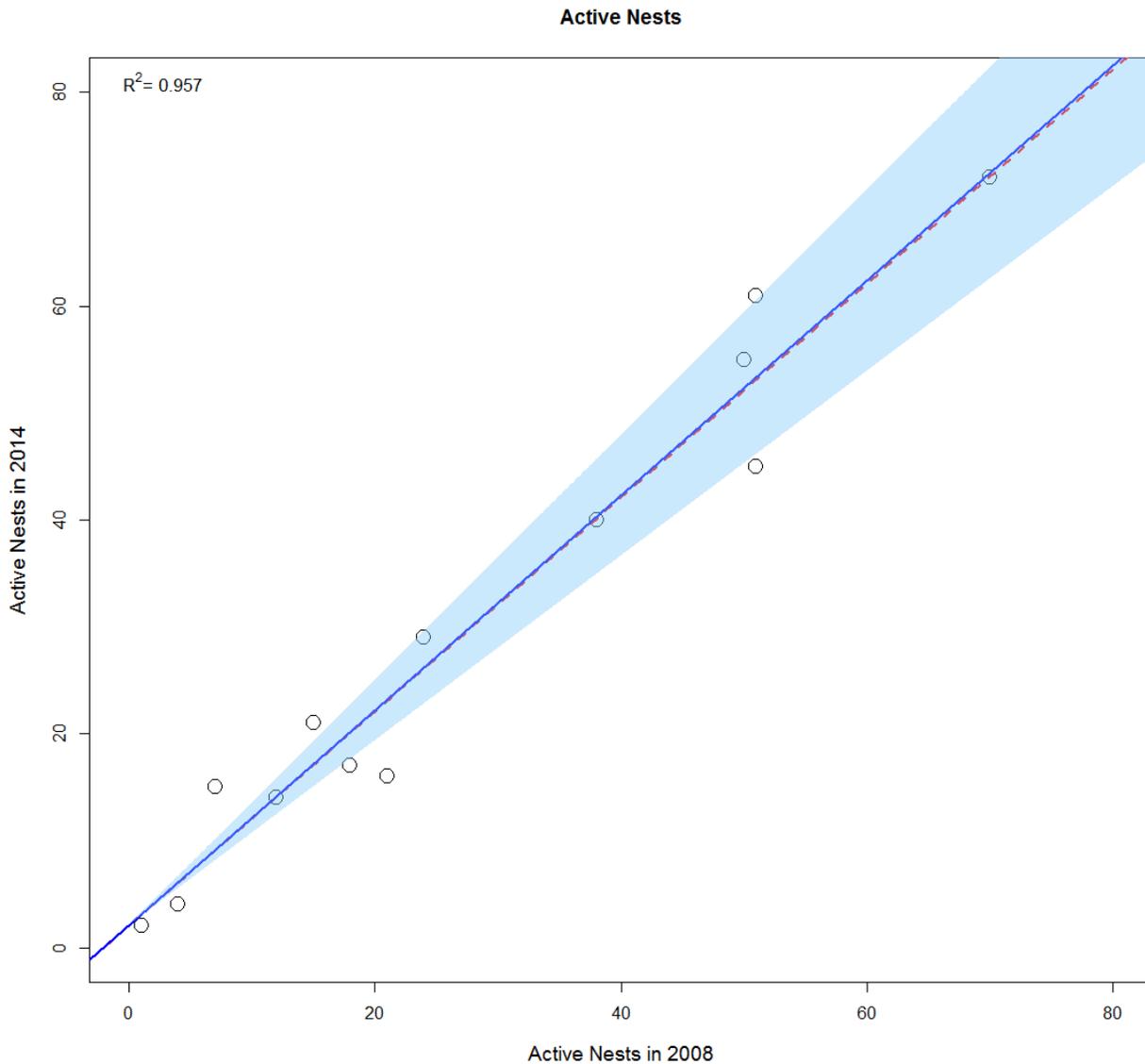


Figure 2. Comparison of slope of active nests in 2014 compared with 2008. Active nests in 2014 do not differ from 2008. The confidence interval for the estimated slope (in light blue) contains 1 (red dashed line); there is neither a significant increase nor decrease from the numbers in 2008.

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