

This resource is based on the following source:

Kale, H. W., II, B. Pranty, B. M. Stith, and C. W. Biggs. 1992. The atlas of the breeding birds of Florida. Final Report. Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Tallahassee, Florida.

This resource can be cited as:

Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission. 2003, January 6. Florida's breeding bird atlas: A collaborative study of Florida's birdlife. <http://www.myfwc.com/bba/> (Date accessed mm/dd/yyyy).

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

The recovery of the Bald Eagle (*H. l. leucocephalus*) represents one of the few high-profile success stories in the state. Many of Florida's breeding eagles are permanent residents, while others migrate north during the summer. Conversely, eagles that breed farther north migrate to Florida for the winter. On the North American continent, Bald Eagles breed from central Alaska south to Baja and east along the Gulf coast. They are absent from large portions of the Midwest and the Great Basin and rare in most other inland areas of the United States (Stevenson and Anderson 1994).

Habitat. In Florida, a typical nest site is located near a large body of water in a tall living pine or cypress tree that offers good visibility of the surrounding area. Hardwoods are used on occasion, and in extreme South Florida, where pines do not occur, mangroves are used. Alternate nests are fairly common and are generally within 300 m (1,000 ft) of the primary nest site. Destroyed or blown-out nests are usually rebuilt, if possible, very close to the original nest. Nests may remain active for 15 or more years. The distance between active territories differs greatly; the minimum distance is less than 75 m (250 ft) (White 1990) with a separation of 1 to 2 km (0.6 to 1.2 mi) not uncommon.



Illustration © 1995 Diane Pierce, All Rights Reserved.

Nests are initially constructed of branches and twigs and are later lined with fresh moss, grasses, and leaves. It is not uncommon for nests to remain inactive during certain years or to be taken over by Great Horned Owls. Nests may be located in remote "pristine" habitats, semi-rural areas, ranchlands, suburbia, and, infrequently, in urban environments. Several recent nests have been located literally in the backyards of residential neighborhoods. Successful breeding usually does not occur until the adults reach at least 5 or 6 years of age.

Incubation lasts approximately 32 to 34 days, and the young fledge 10 to 12 weeks later. Juveniles are dependent on adults for an additional 6 weeks after fledging. Typically 2 bluish-green eggs are laid, although 3 are laid on occasion and there is 1 record exists of 4 eggs in a nest (White 1989). What appears to be possibly the first North American record of a nest to successfully fledge 4 juveniles was documented in rural Osceola County (White 1995). The statewide survival rate in 1995 was 1.18 young per active nest or 1.58 birds fledged per successful nest (Nesbitt 1995).

Eagles are carnivorous and opportunistic, feeding primarily on fish and secondarily on birds, small mammals, and carrion.

Seasonal Occurrence. Nesting territories generally become active from September through November, with juveniles fledging in March, April, or May. However, nesting is asynchronous, resulting in some birds hatching as early as mid-December, with occasional second clutching occurring in late winter.

Status. The number of active breeding territories in Florida now exceeds 800 (Nesbitt 1995), which represents approximately 75 to 80% of the total breeding population in the southeast (USFWS 1989). The current population of Bald Eagles in Florida is estimated to be between 2,220 and 3,220 birds, including adults, sub-

adults, and juveniles (Nesbitt 1995). This is a substantial increase over a decades-long decline due to exposure to organochlorine pesticides and other factors. Because the population remains relatively healthy in the state and is increasing, the Bald Eagle is considered a Threatened Species by the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission], but it remained on the federal list as Endangered through 1994 because populations in other states (excluding Alaska) were still dangerously low. As recovery goals were successfully met throughout the majority of the lower 48 states, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reclassified the Bald Eagle status as of July 12, 1995, as authorized by the Endangered Species Act. Federal status is now listed as Threatened, though no change has occurred with reference to interpretation of the Southeastern Management Guidelines at this point in time (White, pers. commun.).

Fifty of the 67 counties in the state have been documented with at least 1 active territory in the past 5 years (1991-96). The lowest numbers of breeding eagles are found in the Panhandle and southeastern peninsula, while the highest densities occur in the St. Johns River basin, central Florida inland lake systems, the southwest coast and coastal parts of Everglades National Park. Over 180 active territories were documented in 1995 in Polk and Osceola counties. The majority of recently confirmed nests were found by Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission [editor: now Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission] aerial surveys in the past 7 years while some nests were reported by volunteers for the Atlas project or by the general public.

The Bald Eagle has surpassed initial recovery goals in Florida because of strict federal and state enforcement of habitat management guidelines and increased public awareness about this magnificent raptor. However, loss of critical nesting habitat, coupled with increasing developmental pressure, appears to be the most limiting factor affecting eagles in the state. Wildlife rehabilitators are now reporting increased numbers of eagles being brought to their centers with injuries caused by other eagles during territorial fights. This suggests that nesting territories are becoming more scarce (R. Collins, pers. comm.).

John H. White

Sponsored by Margaret K. Rondeau

Bald Eagle

