a species that is so dependent on large trees for nesting, roosting, and hunting perch sites, perhaps the greatest threat facing its existence today is the continued destruction of woodland habitat along our rivers.

EAGLE ETIQUETTE

During the winter, bald eagles are under pressure to consume enough food and expend as little energy as possible in order to maintain body heat. If fishermen, bird watchers, or boaters get too close to the eagles, the birds will waste valuable energy flying away. It exposes them to undue stress and could cause abandonment of a site. To avoid disturbing eagles, do not get any closer than 400 yards from a perched eagle. When possible, stay in your vehicle, use a blind, or stand behind stationary objects when viewing eagles. Stay on the opposite side of the river or lake to allow them a peaceful refuge. Since over 70% of the eagle's feeding occurs during the early morning, avoid visiting areas that eagles rely on for food before 9 a.m.

If you find a dead or injured eagle, call the local conservation officer, biologist, or the DNR Wildlife Diversity Program. Bald eagles are protected by several federal laws, with fines of over $20,000 for harassing, killing or wounding an eagle. If you see a bald eagle in Iowa between April and August, please report this to the local biologist or Wildlife Diversity staff. A bald eagle seen during these months may be nesting nearby, and it is important to document any potential nest sites. But remember—eagles are very sensitive to disturbances when nesting and raising young, so remain at least 1/4-mile from the nest!

Photo By: Rick Leche

If you or anyone you know locates a bald eagle nest, please report your findings to the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Wildlife Diversity Program!

We can be contacted via telephone at:
(515) 432-2823

Or on the web at:
http://www.iowadnr.com/wildlife/diversity/report_eagles.html

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

1436 255th St.
Boone, IA 50036
Phone: (515) 432-2823
Fax: (515) 432-2835

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Revised by: Jenni Dyar, AmeriCorps, 2010

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Bald Eagles in Iowa

Photo By: Danny Barron

Photo By: Jonathan Guberman

On June 20, 1782, Congress chose the Bald Eagle as our national symbol. In colonial times bald meant white as well as hairless, which is why the bald eagle got its name. At the time of European settlement, it is estimated there were 100,000 eagle pairs in the lower 48 states. By the 1960s winter counts averaged less than 4,000 eagles. In Iowa, there were no known nesting pairs after 1905. This drastic decline can be attributed to direct persecution, habitat loss, and pesticide contamination.

The Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act was passed in 1940 in an attempt to reverse the eagle's decline. However, it became clear a more comprehensive policy was needed if we wanted to save bald eagles, and other species, from extinction. In 1978, Congress protected the Bald Eagle under the Endangered Species Act.

These protective laws and an increased awareness of and concern for bald eagles are leading to its recovery. The number of nesting pairs counted in the lower 48 states has gone from 417 in 1963 to over 9,000 in 2006! Iowa had its first bald eagle nest in over 70 years in 1977, and since then eagle nests have been reported in 86 of Iowa's 99 counties.

There are currently 262 bald eagle territories classified as 'active' by the Iowa DNR. In order for a territory to be considered active, there has be nesting activity reported within the last three years.

Photo By: Tom Talbott

Unfortunately, DNR staff no longer has the resources to monitor many of the Iowa nests, nor to adequately search for new nests. As a result, we depend on volunteers to report eagle nest activity. Bald eagles are sensitive to disturbance, especially during the nesting season (January-July). If you locate a bald eagle nest, please remain at least 1/4-mile away and report your findings to the Iowa DNR Wildlife Diversity Program at (515) 432-2823.

LIFE CYCLE & HABITS

Bald eagles have a life span of 20-30 years in the wild. Pairs tend to mate for life, returning to the same nest site year after year. The nest is usually built in an isolated, dominant tree with strong branches that is near water. The pair will defend the square mile surrounding it against any nesting competitors or predators. If their nest from the previous year is still there, the pair will simply add to it. As a result, nests can be seven feet wide, ten feet deep, and weigh as much as two tons.

The female lays two to three eggs at 4-day intervals. Both parents incubate, and after 35-40 days the eggs hatch. The chicks are called eaglets. The first two weeks of the eaglets' life are when the parents are most sensitive to disruption. **No human disturbance can be tolerated at this critical stage.** If the parents are alarmed and fly off, they may not come back.

Photo By: Roger Hill

When an eaglet is three weeks old, it weighs 5 pounds and stands about 12" high. At week five, the eaglet enters the "ramage" stage, when feathers begin to replace the down. Wing exercising to prepare for flight begins in week 8, and during the 9th week young eagles are often seen perching on the braches around the nest (earning them the nickname "branchers").

The young eagles fly for the first time when they are about 75 days old. Young stay near the nest site (eyrie) up to 5 more weeks, and the

Photo By: Don Poggensee

parents continue to feed them. By late summer, immature eagles learn to hunt and forage for themselves. The belly, head, and tail will go through various mottled stages before obtaining the characteristic white head and tail of the adult at 4 or 5 years old.

WINTERS IN IOWA

Winter is the best time to observe bald eagles in Iowa. During the winter, numerous eagles from northern states and Canada migrate south to find food. The birds begin arriving in Iowa during September and become more numerous through January. The highest concentration of eagles in the Midwest is along the Mississippi River. Each year 4,000 to 7,000 bald eagles winter along the Mississippi, from Minneapolis-St. Paul to 50 miles south of St. Louis. The river is a popular wintering area because of abundant food and open water, particularly at locks and dams and power plants that keep the river from freezing. This provides the eagles with an area to hunt their primary food source—fish.

Photo By: Roger Hill

In addition to food, bald eagles need places to roost during the night and perch during the day. Bald eagles generally roost together in large mature trees surrounded by a buffer of smaller trees. Roosts are chosen by the eagles to provide protection from the weather and avoid disturbances. Roosts are also generally close to a source of food. Daytime perches are usually within 60 yards of the water's edge. For