



Photo by Billy Pope

Is that an Eagle I See?

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Twenty years ago, if someone were to tell me they saw an eagle in Alabama, I would have guessed that it was probably just a vulture. Now, when someone tells me they saw an eagle in the winter, I ask them, “Which species?” While we have an increasing number of bald eagles year-round across the state, we are actually discovering a small wintering population of golden eagles in Alabama as well.

The story of the bald eagle recovery is one of the greatest wildlife success stories to date. In the 1950s and ‘60s, the well-known pesticide DDT caused eggshell thinning, devastating bald eagle numbers. Shells became so thin that they would not hatch, or would



Photo by Kathleen Brown

break when adult birds would sit to incubate them. After DDT was banned in 1972, eagles began to rebound slowly, but still could not be found breeding in Alabama.

By 1984, the Alabama Division of Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries (WFF) began a “hacking” program with juvenile eagles at six different locations in the state, with the hope that they would establish nesting territories. Hacking involves releasing the young birds at towers in certain locations to imprint them, so they will return to those areas to breed as adults. During a seven-year period, 91 juvenile eagles were released resulting in increased nesting activity in Alabama. Thanks to the success of this program, eagles can



Photo by Billy Pope

This golden eagle was captured, banded, and measured as part of a research study.

now be found nesting across the state. Most often, bald eagles are seen along large bodies of water, such as lakes and rivers, but it is not uncommon to observe them soaring over open land or nesting away from water as well.

Although bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) are now a common sight year-round, people may not realize that we also have golden eagles in Alabama during the winter months. Golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos*) tend to be more secretive than bald eagles, making it harder to locate those birds. More of a forest species, they stay closer to the forest and are often found near ridge tops in forested areas. In the western United States, a substantial golden eagle population is already in existence. New evidence suggests that a separate eastern population breeds in eastern Canada and winters along the Appalachian Mountains and down into Alabama.

To gain a better knowledge about this separate eastern population of golden eagles, WFF has been conducting winter camera surveys through a collaborative effort with other agencies in 15 eastern states. Over the last few years, we have photographed numerous golden eagles in north Alabama and gained valuable information. Also, five adult birds have been trapped and radio transmitters attached to them to find out where they breed and migrate. Through these camera surveys and radio tracking, we hope to learn more about golden eagles so that we can manage public lands to provide wintering habitat for them, as well as all species found in the state.

WFF often receives calls about possible golden eagle sightings. They usually turn out to be immature bald eagles, as most people do not realize that it takes five years for bald eagles to obtain the distinct white head and tail. Immature bald eagles are mostly dark brown overall with white mottling under their wings, and they have thick black bills. They are often confused with golden eagles, but lack the distinct gold nape. Adult golden eagles do not have any white on the undersides of wings, while juveniles have two distinct, small white patches visible when seen soaring overhead. While confusing the two birds is understandable, it is easier to distinguish which kind of eagle you are

Photo by USFWS4



Triumphant Return – The bald eagle, America’s national symbol and consummate symbol of wildlife, is truly a majestic bird.

viewing after seeing both in flight and learning the differences in coloration.

Because eagle populations are doing so well, WFF does not conduct an annual statewide survey of eagle nests. However, if you have information or questions about nesting eagles or sightings of golden eagles, please contact Nongame Wildlife Biologist Carrie Threadgill at carrie.threadgill@dcnr.alabama.gov or (334) 242-3469.

During the winter, it is possible to see both golden and bald eagles . . . while it is most likely a bald eagle, either way, spotting an eagle in Alabama is always a treat! 🦅