



WILDLIFE NOTES

Bald eagle

The bald eagle has rebounded in recent years from near extinction to a viable, growing population. The extent of this encouraging increase enabled the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service to downlist the eagle's status from Endangered to Threatened in 1995.

DESCRIPTION

With its dark brown body and white head and tail, the adult bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is one of the easiest birds to identify in the field. Other identification marks include its yellow, massive beak (disproportionately large for its head), yellow ceres (nostrils), black-clawed yellow feet, bare yellow legs, and lemon-colored eyes. Adult females range from 30" to 43" tall, weigh up to 14 pounds, and have about an eight-foot wingspan. The male is smaller, standing 27" to 30" tall, weighing seven to 10 pounds, with a six-foot wingspan.

Surprisingly weak for such a large bird, the bald

in recent years, one each in Colfax and Sierra Counties. These areas also support large concentrations of wintering eagles. This species typically breeds from Alaska to Newfoundland, southward to Baja California, the Southwest, Texas, and Florida; it generally winters south in the breeding range, occasionally to northern Mexico.

In New Mexico, migrating bald eagles can be found near rivers and lakes, where occasional tall trees provide lookout perches and night roosts. Reservoirs with sizable populations of migrating bald eagles include Ute, Conchas, Ft. Sumner, Santa Rosa, Elephant Butte, Caballo, Cochiti, El Vado, Heron, and Navajo. Other areas where bald eagles may be seen in winter months are the Maxwell National Wildlife Refuge and lakes like McAllister, Stubblefield, and York.

There are also New Mexico 'dry-land' areas where bald eagles are frequently seen: between the Pecos Valley and the Sandia, Manzano, Capitan, and

Sacramento Mountains, as well as on the Mogollon Plateau.

FEEDING

Bald eagles feed primarily on fish, such as carp and suckers, and waterfowl. They may harass ospreys to force them to disgorge their prey. Bald eagles will also feed on carrion, including dead livestock and road-killed deer. Dry-land bald eagles typically prey upon jackrabbits. Large fish or birds that are too heavy to lift are towed to the shore over the surface of the water. Other prey may be carried in both talons to a feeding place. At the nest, the female typically divides the food among the nestlings.

BREEDING

Eagle pairs mate for life. Together, they build a large stick nest high in a dead snag, less frequently on a cliff.

Eagles tend to use the same nest, year after year, adding to the massive pile of sticks annually. Their typical clutch is two to three white eggs. During incubation, the male feeds the female.

Eggs hatch after about 35 days, at intervals of a few days, and the first eaglet feeds at the expense of later siblings. In New Mexico, fledglings leave the nest in mid-June after 10 to 13 weeks, but stay near the eyrie (nest) to be fed by their parents until autumn, when the birds tend to disperse.

Frequently confused with adult golden eagles, young bald eagles are dark brown until they reach full adulthood four to six years later. Young bald eagles are distinguished from golden eagles by their overall mottled appearance and by their larger dark bill (not yet yellow), pale wing linings, and bare legs (golden eagle legs are feathered).

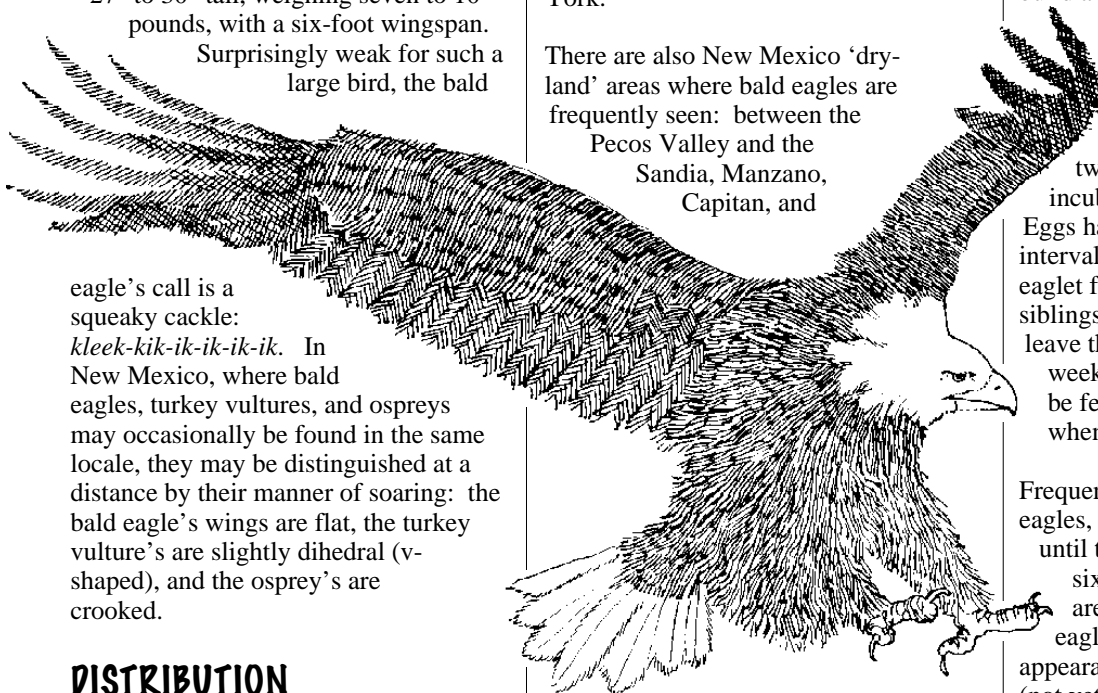
eagle's call is a squeaky cackle:

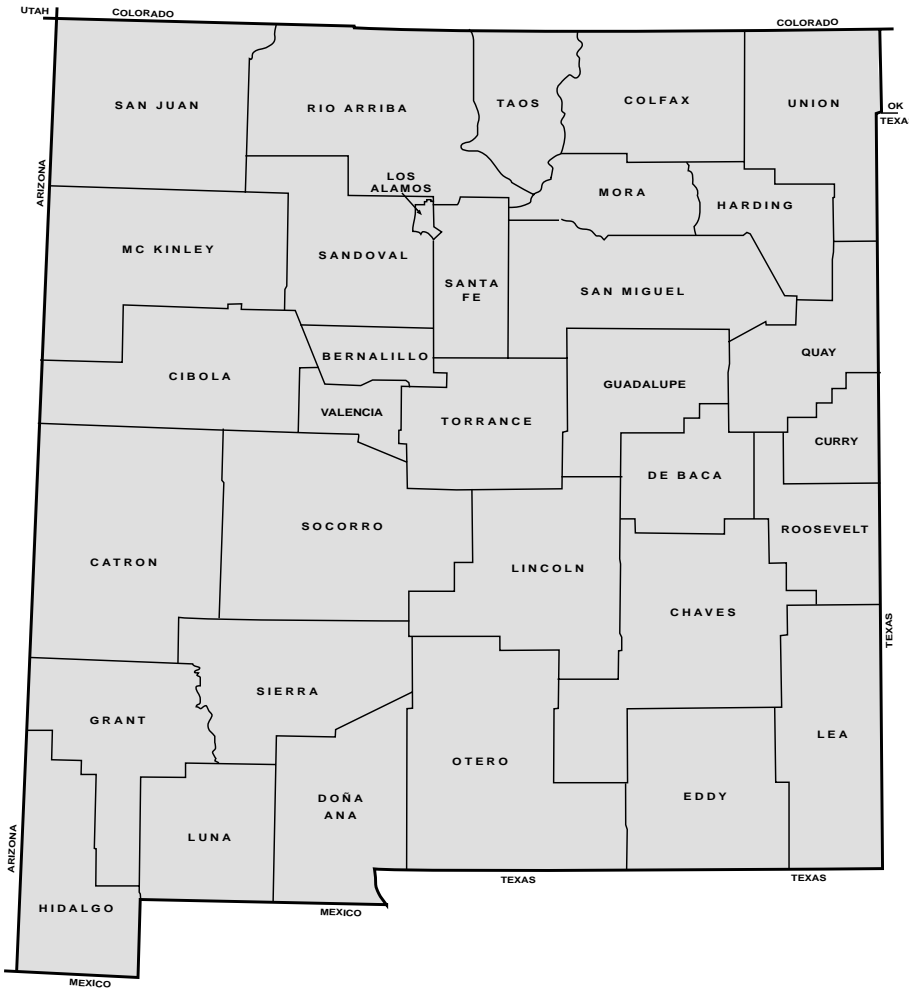
kleek-kik-ik-ik-ik-ik. In

New Mexico, where bald eagles, turkey vultures, and ospreys may occasionally be found in the same locale, they may be distinguished at a distance by their manner of soaring: the bald eagle's wings are flat, the turkey vulture's are slightly dihedral (v-shaped), and the osprey's are crooked.

DISTRIBUTION

For the most part, New Mexico's bald eagle population is migratory. However, at least two pairs have nested in the state





ATTITUDES ABOUT EAGLES

When European colonists first arrived in North America, there were an estimated quarter million to half million bald eagles living in what is now the United States. This handsome eagle, native to North America, was selected as the national emblem of our new nation in 1782. However, despite its status as a national symbol, the bald eagle declined between 1782 and 1940. Eagles came to be viewed as killers of livestock, therefore 'varmints' to be eliminated. In the early 20th Century, a bounty was set for bald eagles, paying 50 cents for each pair of feet; this reward was later increased to a dollar. It is estimated that more than 100,000 bald eagles were killed before 1940, when the Bald Eagle Act was passed, banning the killing or selling of bald eagles in the United States.

PESTICIDE CONTAMINATION

Why did bald eagle numbers to continue to plummet after the species gained protection from wanton killing? The cause was pesticides, including DDT and its related metabolites, which came

into broad agricultural usage during the 1950s and 1960s. DDT accumulated in animal tissue, often to dangerous degrees. Located at the top of the food chain, bald eagles consumed prey that ingested significant concentrations of DDT. This resulted in reproductive failures, as eagles began laying eggs with thin shells that cracked during incubation. After its dangers were discovered, DDT was banned from use in the United States in 1972, although its use continues in some parts of the world.

POPULATION TRENDS

Though a 1963 National Audubon Society survey identified just 417 active bald eagle nests in the 48 contiguous states, since the banning of DDT these numbers climbed to an encouraging 4,500 pairs in just 30 years. Numbers of migratory bald eagles have continued to increase in New Mexico as well, providing additional evidence of a recovering continental population.

In 1979, the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish began aerial surveys of bald eagles on an annual basis. Numbers of bald eagles surveyed have increased,

on average, by about 75 birds every four years. During the early 1980s, the average number of bald eagles observed on these standard transects was 220. These numbers climbed to 303 by the late 1980s, 396 in the early 1990s, and 449 to date.

CURRENT STATUS

In 1967, the bald eagle was federally listed as an endangered species in the 48 contiguous states. Since that time, as a result of concerted conservation efforts, bald eagle populations have rebounded nationwide. In 1995 the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service downlisted the bald eagle from endangered to threatened, and the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish supported that decision. In New Mexico, the bald eagle is likewise state-listed as a threatened species.

THREATS and CONCERNS

Today the main threat to New Mexico's wintering bald eagles, and to its small breeding population, is habitat loss or degradation. Human disturbance, pesticide contamination, accidental electrocution, illegal shooting and poisoning, and trapping eagles for their feathers continues to be a problem. To help New Mexico's bald eagles fully recover, we must continue efforts to maintain and enhance habitat and to protect individual birds.

*Published 1996
Jane Susan MacCarter*

**Wildlife Notes is published by
the Department of Game and Fish.
If you are interested in obtaining
additional copies, please send
your request to:
Conservation Education Section
Department of Game and Fish
PO Box 25112
Santa Fe, NM 87504
(505) 476-8119**

