



## **Bald Eagles in the White Mountains**

**By Dan Groebner**

**Photo by George Andrejko**

It's bald eagle season in the White Mountains of Arizona! Wait a minute, aren't bald eagles famous for eating fish and being found along major waterways, lakes of the Midwest and the Pacific Northwest? Well, yes, but they have also been staging a comeback in the Grand Canyon State, known more for hosting all three of the North American deserts, the Mojave, Sonoran, and Chihuahuan.

Bald eagles have adapted to Arizona's permanent waterways even along the lower elevations of the Salt and Verde Rivers where saguaro replace ponderosa trees as the tallest vegetation. They sometimes nest in cliffs surrounding these rivers, which is more typical for golden eagles. But Arizona desert eagles, as well as White Mountain residential eagles, still depend on fish as a primary source of nutrition. The type and amount of fish available for eagles has changed over time, with bigger and more numerous non-native fish provided through the Arizona Game and Fish stocking program, although intended primarily for human anglers.

A combination of factors has allowed bald eagle populations to expand in Arizona, in addition to the more available fish. Other important elements include the reduction of chemicals that thin egg shells and poison adults, stringent legal protection, habitat protection and active management in some areas to prevent disturbance during the sensitive egg-incubating and chick-rearing seasons. Nationwide, bald eagle populations have rebounded so well that they were taken off the list of endangered and threatened species 10 years ago but are still protected by the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and the Migratory Bird Treaty Act, among other laws.

So, is one season better than another for seeing bald eagles in the White Mountains? Actually, winter brings many eagles from Canada and northern states down to our relatively mild climate, abundant with lakes, reservoirs and rivers supporting enough fish and waterfowl for over-wintering eagles of all ages. Throw in abundant road-killed wildlife taken out by vehicles and a few gut piles left over from the hunting seasons and these birds have a veritable smorgasbord to choose from. You wouldn't think such a regal looking bird would stoop to scavenging but they're just doing what is necessary to survive and reproduce. We don't usually see trees loaded with a dozen or more eagles like they do in some places of the northwest and along the Mississippi. However, if you spend enough time on Rainbow or Fool Hollow Lake after winter really sets in, you might see a couple dozen different eagles throughout the morning.

Lately, more of these winter "snowbirds" have been sticking around the White Mountains to set up shop and raise little eaglets. Nesting pairs were once rare in the area but last year saw at least eight breeding pairs maintaining territories from Woods Canyon Lake in the west to Luna Lake in the east. Temporary

closures are needed at some nests to prevent human disturbance that could erase an entire year's worth of productivity if the adults are frightened from their incubation duties for just 20 minutes in cold weather. Some eagle pairs are more tolerant of disturbance and choose to nest near human traffic but these nests also have a threshold distance when adults will flee their nests.

Bald eagles tend to establish nesting territories relatively near where they were born, even though they sometimes migrate thousands of miles during their first five years while they are maturing into adults. Biologists discovered this by using colored and numbered leg bands that can be seen from a distance with a spotting scope. So, the next time you get close to one of our national symbols, look for the band on one of their un-feathered lower legs (which is one characteristic distinguishing bald from golden eagles). Please report any bands you observe to the local Game and Fish office.

Bald eagles may not have the talon strength of golden eagles, which often prey on much larger animals, but they still can lock their talons in a ratcheting fashion to grasp and not release slippery trout or native suckers. With their long, broad powerful wings, bald eagles are able to lift prey that's one third of their own body weight. They also have highly adapted vision, being able to see any prey animals in three square miles from 1,000 feet in the air. This means they can see a rabbit from a mile away!

With all of these amazing abilities, it is no wonder that many Native American cultures respect and revere the bald eagle. Local Apache tribes consider their feathers powerful and Lakota awarded feathers as a symbol of honor. Pawnee saw the bald eagle as a symbol of fertility since they were usually successful in fledging at least one chick even in bad years. And the bald eagle was considered a symbol of peace to the Choctaw, even though a current symbol of peace, the dove, might not feel that way.

Are you ready to help the White Mountain eagle population continue to grow? Besides learning more about eagles and White Mountain wildlife, what else can you do to help? The obvious things include respecting closures around nests and keeping your distance from all nests, even if an official closure is not posted. When fishing or hiking along a lakeshore, try to remove any discarded fishing line since the eagles and osprey often try to use it for nest material, tragically resulting in strangled chicks and sometimes even adults. Be careful with rusty hooks! Most area lakes have receptacles made from white PVC tube mounted near boat landings and trails where line can be collected and recycled. If they are not present, or are already full, just discard the line in the nearest garbage can.

Hunters can voluntarily use non-lead bullets to prevent poisoning of eagles that scavenge on gut piles or wounding losses as lead poisoning is unfortunately seen in eagles every year in this area. Sensible driving speeds (some evidently consider this within 1 Mach of the speed limit!) can keep your vehicle repair and insurance rates from increasing due to wildlife collisions and you'll have time to react and avoid hitting an eagle scavenging along the roadside on somebody else's encounter with that Mayhem guy.

Interested in learning more about eagles first-hand? Join Arizona Game and Fish and Liberty Wildlife for an indoor program on eagle natural history in the White Mountains with a live eagle, followed by a field trip to a nearby lake to hopefully observe wintering eagles hunting fish and waterfowl. The program begins at 10 a.m. at the White Mountain Nature Center on Woodland Road in Lakeside, just south of the stoplights at the WME theatre. A \$5 donation for adults will be split between the Nature Center and Liberty Wildlife, to help them provide programs like this and rehabilitate injured wildlife.