

bald eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Aves

Order: Accipitriformes

Family: Accipitridae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

An adult bald eagle is 30 to 31 inches long. This large bird has dark brown body feathers with some black feathers. The head, neck and tail feathers are white in mature birds. The bill, eyes and feet are yellow. Females are larger than males. Both sexes are similar in appearance.

BEHAVIORS

The bald eagle is a common migrant and winter resident in Illinois. It is a rare summer resident although some eagles do nest in Illinois. This bird winters along the Illinois, Mississippi and Rock rivers and at large lakes and rivers where the winter waters are ice free. This bird feeds on small birds, carrion (dead animals), fishes, small mammals and wounded or ill waterfowl. It perches in the open branches of a tall tree near a body of water, open field or forest. Its call is "kweek-kik-ik-ik-ik." Spring migration begins in February or March. When courting, the male and female lock talons in flight and fall several hundred feet together in a series of somersaults. The nest is built in an eastern cottonwood or sycamore tree. Two or three white eggs are laid in March or April. Young do not attain adult plumage for three or more years. Fall migration starts in August. Illegal hunting, use of the pesticide DDT and human disturbances led to this species' decline. Federal laws passed in the 1970s protect this bird from being hunted. DDT poisoning caused problems for the eagle population. This bird indirectly ingested DDT from the food it ate. The more contaminated prey items eaten by the eagle, the more chemicals would build up in its body. DDT caused the egg shells of the bald eagle to be thin, and many young eagles did not survive to hatching. Often the eggs would crack while being incubated. Human disturbances to eagle habitat and nesting areas and removal of nesting and perching trees have also been problems. Recently the bald eagle population has been making a comeback aided by habitat protection and improvement, citizen awareness and changes in pesticides. It is no longer a threatened species.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

lakes, ponds and reservoirs; rivers and streams

Woodland Habitats

none

Prairie and Edge Habitats

none

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