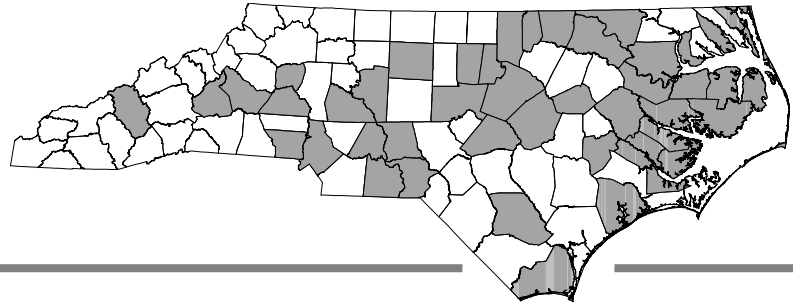


Bald eagle

Haliaeetus leucocephalus

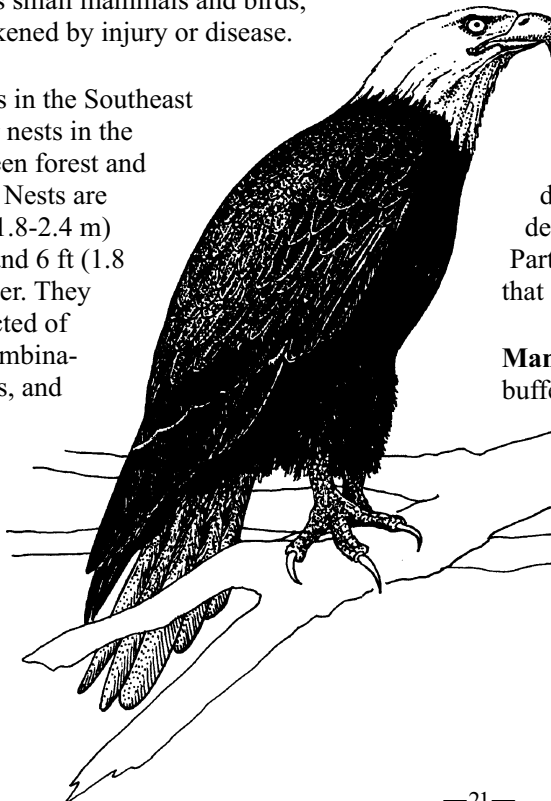
Threatened (August 11, 1995; originally listed as Endangered on March 11, 1967; proposed for delisting, July 6, 1999)



Description: Bald eagles are large raptors, 32-43 inches (81-109 cm) long, with a white head, white tail, yellow bill, yellow eyes and feet. The lower section of the leg has no feathers. Wingspread is about 7 ft (2.1 m). The characteristic plumage of adults is dark brown to black with young birds completely dark brown. Juveniles have a dark bill, pale markings on the belly, tail, and under the wings and do not develop the white head and tail until 5-6 years old.

Life History: Bald eagles do not adapt well to changes in their habitat and this results in relatively low reproductive rates. They are not sexually mature until the age of 4-5 years, when they mate for life or until the death of a mate. In North Carolina, nest building takes place in December and January, with egg laying (clutch of 1-3 eggs) in February and hatching in March. Incubation lasts 35 days. Hatchlings attain adult size in 8 weeks. They are opportunistic feeders consuming a variety of living prey and carrion. Up to 80% of their diet is fish, self caught, scavenged, or robbed from osprey. They may also take various small mammals and birds, especially those weakened by injury or disease.

Habitat: Bald eagles in the Southeast frequently build their nests in the transition zone between forest and marsh or open water. Nests are cone-shaped, 6-8 ft (1.8-2.4 m) from top to bottom, and 6 ft (1.8 m) or more in diameter. They are typically constructed of sticks lined with a combination of leaves, grasses, and Spanish moss. Nests are built in dominant live pines or cypress trees that provide a good view and clear flight path, usually less than 0.5 mile (0.8 km) from open water. Winter roosts are usually in



dominant trees, similar to nesting trees, but may be somewhat farther from water.

Distribution: Eagles range across North America but are most common in Alaska. In 1985 there was just a single active nest in NC, but by 2001, there were 34 nesting pairs in the state. Although most nests are in the lower coastal plain near estuaries, several are present at Piedmont foothills and lakes. Non-nesting eagles are most abundant in the northern coastal plain and along the Pee Dee-Yadkin River system, where they occur year-round. Winter and summer roosts have also been established at several Piedmont reservoirs. Eagles may be nesting at Mattamuskeet National Wildlife Refuge, where a hacking program released 33 eagles by 1990 (Lee and Parnell 1990). They are reported in Anson, Beaufort, Bertie, Brunswick, Burke, Chatham, Chowan, Craven, Currituck, Dare*, Davidson, Durham, Gaston, Granville, Guilford, Harnett, Haywood, Hyde, Johnston, Lenoir, Martin, McDowell, Mecklenburg, Montgomery, Northampton, Onslow, Pamlico, Pasquotank, Pitt, Richmond, Rowan, Stanly, Tyrrell, Vance, Wake, and Washington, Wilson counties.

Threats: Disturbance and destruction of roosting, foraging and nesting habitat by urban and residential development. Avian vacuolar myelinopathy (AVM), first detected in 1994, which impairs flight and results in death. Partial recovery of species is due to prohibition of pesticides that caused death and low viability of eggs in reproduction.

Management Recommendations: Protection of vegetative buffers on shorelines of lakes, rivers, and reservoirs where development is encroaching; restoration of habitat; and protection of good water quality. Enforcement of protection of species from hunting and harassment.

* No record has been reported in this county in the past 20 years.

Sources: Henson 1990, Potter et al. 1980, USFWS 1992a., USGS 2001.