

Environmental Corner – Bald Eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) Soar in Bethany Beach



When the Town of Bethany Beach created the new addition of **Central Park**, located at the corner of Route 1 and Garfield Parkway, some mature trees were left to welcome the newly-planted trees. Discovered in the mature trees were some of Bethany Beach's resident **Eagles!** The eagles could be seen throughout the summer and fall soaring over the park and roosting in the park trees.

On January 2, 2021, BBLA Board Member Chip Smith (author of the EC entries) observed a pair of Bald Eagles soaring together over the beach and waves in search of prey. Since Bald Eagles are predominantly fish eaters, they build their nests near areas of open water for foraging and prey (such as fish, waterfowl, small mammals, and carrion). They have strong feet with four toes that are equipped with great curved talons for catching and holding prey while flying with it and consuming it. During the breeding season, adults sleep either at the nest or on a branch in the nest tree or nearby tree; Eagles have a specialized mechanism in their foot that allows them to lock it in position so they can sleep without having to consciously control the foot.

It takes young birds about five years to attain the white heads, dark brown bodies/wings, and bright yellow legs and beaks. A mated pair of Bald Eagles build their nest together and feed their young. Females typically lay 1 to 3 eggs and incubate for about 35 days. The newly hatched Bald Eagles remain in their nest for about 3 months, and are fully grown when they leave the nest (fledge). By 5 months, immature eagles leave their nesting area. Migratory immature eagles often will return to the general vicinity (within 200 miles) of where they were born when they reach maturity and are ready to find a mate of their own and build a nest.

Interestingly, while Bald Eagles are known to migrate north up the Delaware River Valley to breeding grounds in March (returning in December), in recent years scientists and birdwatchers have noticed that communities in our general area have an increasing number of year-around resident Bald Eagles up and down the Delaware River Valley. These majestic birds require adequate undisturbed upland areas for perching and roosting, characteristics of suitable overwintering habitat. Bethany Beach and the surrounding area provide a variety of ocean, riverine, beach/dune, wetland, and upland habitats critically important for fish and wildlife species in general, and in particular our Bald Eagle population.

In 1978, fewer than 10 Bald Eagles were observed in Delaware. In 2016, State biologists documented 71 Bald Eagle pairs (with ~72 chicks) in Delaware. Recovery of the species is well underway. The Bald Eagle population was hit especially hard by development (public, commercial, and residential), habitat loss and degradation, and indiscriminate hunting. Perhaps the most serious threat to Bald Eagles was the extensive use of DDT and other pesticides which inhibited successful reproduction. In 1940, Congress enacted The [Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act](#) (amended in 1962) which prohibited the “take, possession, sale, purchase, barter, offer to sell, purchase or barter, transport, export or import, of any **bald** or golden **eagle**, alive or dead, including any part, nest, or egg unless allowed by permit.” “Take’ includes pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap, collect, molest or disturb.” These laws, the Federal Government’s ban on the production and use of DDT in 1972, and a number of recovery and restoration programs carried out to protect Bald Eagles and their habitat, have played a major role in the recovery of the Bald Eagle population. The Delaware River is considered an "essential" Bald Eagle winter habitat, as specified by the [Northern States Bald Eagle Recovery Plan](#). Preservation of "essential habitat" is considered necessary for the full recovery and long-term survival of this species.

Bald Eagle Information:

- Breeding season for Bald Eagles in the Bethany Beach area occurs between November and December.
- Bald Eagles have feathers on their heads that turn white as the birds mature.
- The Bald eagle's scientific name, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, means sea (hali), eagle (aetos), white (leukos), and head (cephalos) as in the feathers on the eagle's head. The word “bald” comes from the old English “balde,” meaning white.
- Field studies indicate that Bald Eagles mate for life, unless one partner dies early; most Bald Eagles seem to return to the same nests year after year.
- Female Bald Eagles weigh up to 14 pounds, and have a wingspan of up to eight feet; male eagles weigh up to 10 pounds, and have a wingspan of ~6 feet.

- Eagles and other birds have three eyelids. There are two outside eyelids; the bottom is bigger than the top, so they blink up instead of down. The inner eyelid is called a nictitating membrane; it grows in the inner corner of the eye, right next to the tear duct, is transparent, and sweeps across the eye from side to side.
- Bald Eagles seem to be most visible in the early morning – sunrise to about 10 a.m.; in the afternoon they are more likely to be soaring (which can make viewing more difficult); Bald Eagle sightings have been reported in Central Park just before sunset when a few birds have been sighted roosting in the mature trees in the southeast corner.
- Bald Eagles live for about 30 years.
- Cooperative efforts to re-establish Bald Eagles in the eastern United States have been sufficiently successful; therefore, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service was able to remove these birds, in 2007, from the list of species protected under the Endangered Species Act.

To view a series of Bald Eagle photographs in Central Park and around Town, click [here](#). We thank BB resident Anne McKinney for sharing her great photos.

For more information on Bald Eagles, please visit the websites listed below:

National Park Service information on Bald Eagles in DE can be found [here](#).

New Jersey information on Bald Eagles can be found [here](#).

All About Birds information on Bald Eagles can be found [here](#).

Mid-East Region, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service information on protections for Golden and Bald Eagles can be found [here](#).