Bald Eagles and the Chesapeake Bay

In the late 1930s, the bald eagle population in the Chesapeake Bay watershed began to decline from poaching, habitat loss and loss of food. In the 1960s, researchers found that the pesticide DDT caused bald eagles and other birds to produce eggs with brittle shells, resulting in a further decline in the population to a low of 80 to 90 breeding pairs in 1970. As a result of this research, the use of DDT was banned in the United States in 1972. In 1973, the bald eagle was listed as endangered in the lower 48 states except for Michigan, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Washington and Oregon, where it was listed as threatened.

By 1977, only 74 active nests could be found in the Maryland and Virginia portion of the watershed; none were found in the Pennsylvania portion. Shortly thereafter, the population began to increase, and in 1995 the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service reclassified the bald eagle from "endangered" to "threatened" in the lower 48 states.

In June 1999, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service introduced a proposal to remove the bald eagle from the Endangered Species List, and concluded that the national bird had fully recovered. Currently, the Fish and Wildlife Service is assessing the status of the eagle in each recovery region to determine if it is appropriate to delist the species.

The long-term success of the Chesapeake basin populations will depend largely on the management of shoreline habitat and in particular, mature forested areas. While the threshold for downlisting the Chesapeake basin population to a non-threatened status has been partially met (300-400 nesting pairs and 1.1 eaglets per active nest sustained over five years), another criteria requiring the permanent protection of habitat for 300-400 nesting pairs still needs to be addressed. The rapid rate of shoreline development, if unchecked, will eliminate most large undisturbed forest blocks in the next 50-100 years. This habitat loss will either limit recovery of the bald eagles, or result in population decline.
About Chesapeake Bay Bald Eagles

The bald eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, is found throughout North America, from Alaska to the northern end of Mexico. In the Chesapeake Bay, bald eagles use large trees for nesting, roosting and perching. The trees must be in areas with limited human activity. Bald eagles are opportunistic predators and scavengers that consume many different prey species. The species eats fish when available, but will shift to a variety of other birds, mammals and turtles, both live and as carrion, when fish are scarce.

Ideal eagle habitat consists of mature shoreline forests with scattered openings, near water with abundant fish and waterfowl. Approximately sixty percent of eagle nests in the Chesapeake region are situated in loblolly pines, but can also be found in other large, “super-canopy” tree species, such as white oak and American beech. Nests can be up to six feet in diameter and weigh hundreds of pounds. They are usually constructed of large sticks and lined with soft materials such as pine needles and grasses. Bald eagles often mate for life, and will lay eggs from January to March, with the peak in February. Adult females will lay one to three eggs which will hatch after approximately 35 days. Chicks will fledge at 10 to 12 weeks of age. In the Chesapeake Bay watershed, eagles often leave their nests between June and July. Eagles develop the white head and tail around their forth or fifth year. Adult bald eagles reach a size of approximately three feet from head to tail, weigh between 10 and 12 pounds and have a wingspread of up to seven feet.

Chesapeake 2000: Helping to Restore the Bald Eagle

In June 2000, Bay Program partners signed *Chesapeake 2000*, the watershedwide plan directing restoration efforts through the next decade.

The bald eagle will benefit from commitments to restore waterside forest buffers, to conserve existing forests along all streams and shorelines, to promote the expansion and connection of contiguous forests through land conservation measures, and to improve the quality of local waters and the Bay.

For more information about Bay Bald Eagles, please visit [http://www.chesapeakebay.net/bald_eagle.htm](http://www.chesapeakebay.net/bald_eagle.htm)

Chesapeake Bay bald eagle populations have seen a ten-fold increase since data collection began in 1977.