

# Bald Eagles



Red River Zoo

Visit this bald eagle at the Red River Zoo in Fargo, North Dakota.

Few animals evoke such awe as the bald eagle. Its likeness is found on coins and stamps, scout badges and flagpoles, and even used as a mascot for numerous sports teams.

**Characteristics:** Both male and female eagles look alike, their head and tail are white and their wings and body are dark brown. Eagles reach adulthood around 6 years of age and can live 30 years or more. Females are typically larger than the males. Eagles weigh 8-12 pounds with a body length of 2.5 - 3 feet, and a wing span of up to 7.5 feet.

**Range & Habitat:** They can be seen throughout the United States near lakes, rivers, marshes, and along the coasts. The Red River riparian zone currently has few nesting pairs although they can occasionally be seen following the river during migration.

**Diet:** Bald eagles are fish eagles, favoring fish as its primary food. However, the eagle is an opportunistic forager and will consume other birds, mammals and carrion.

**Behavior:** Eagles take part in a variety of courtship displays; one aerial display involves the pair locking talons and spinning as they descend towards the earth. Males and females pair for life and will produce 2-3 eggs each year. Eagles reach maturity at 6 years of age and can live 30 years or more.

**The Nest:** The largest eagle nest on record is 9.5

feet in diameter and 20 feet deep. The heaviest was recorded in the 1920's and weighed 20 tons! Nests generally range in size from 5 feet (new nest) to 10 feet (old nest) in diameter. Bald eagles will often return to the same nest year after year.

**Young:** When eagles hatch, their eyes are blue and will change to a yellow or golden color as they grow. Their typical plumage, as seen in the picture above, does not appear until they are around 6 years old. Young eagles are completely brown, their coloration changing as they age.

**Endangered Species:** Prior to the 1800's, the bald eagle population was estimated near 250,000 and could be found in nearly every state in the country. As the human population increased, the eagle population decreased. Eagles have been the victim of shooting, poisoning, egg collecting, habitat loss, and most recently, chemical contamination. Their numbers were at an all time low in the 1970's due to the pesticide DDT. The toxins from this chemical would build up in the tissue of fish, the eagle's primary food source, and eventually accumulate in the eagle's body. Reproduction was impaired because the toxins reduced the thickness of the eagle's eggs. As a result, the eggs would break under the weight of the adults during incubation. Bald eagles were fully listed under the Endangered Species Act in 1978. The population has made a dramatic comeback due to habitat

protection, captive breeding programs and regulations on the use of certain chemicals. In the year 2000 it was estimated that there were approximately 13,000 bald eagles. In 1995 the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service downlisted the bald eagle, from the status of endangered to threatened.

## Eagle Nesting Pole

Large tall trees are the preferred nesting sites for eagles. As the Red River Valley Corridor became more densely occupied by humans after the 1800's it was modified to meet our needs. We cut and removed trees to use for firewood, to make room for homes and for agricultural cultivation and to prevent the spread of Dutch Elm Disease. We also, in some cases, felt that it was more aesthetically pleasing to have grass or certain specimen trees instead of what we perceived to be large misshapen or damaged trees. So we removed them. In some cases, this had the adverse effect of removing trees that were used as homes or nesting sites for desirable mammals and birds.

Wildlife managers have utilized several methods to mitigate the damage caused by tree removal. One method is the use of artificial nesting boxes, houses or perches such as the eagle nesting pole directly east of here. Look around the Living Lab and you will find nesting boxes used by a variety of birds including wood ducks and chickadees. Nesting poles have been successfully used to attract osprey and eagles.

Providing these artificial structures does not eliminate the need for preserving and managing wildlife habitat. The replacement of nesting cavities or perches is one technique for enhancing existing habitat and adding to our personal opportunities for wildlife observation.



River Keepers

An eagle nest on an electric pole in central Minnesota.



Red River Zoo

An eagle nest at the Red River Zoo.

Along the Red River large trees are difficult to find, especially in urban areas due to Dutch elm disease and wood cutting. With the recovery of the bald eagle we hope some will chose to nest here at the Living Lab. There are currently a few eagle nests located through out the valley.

Occasionally eagles will nest on large power line poles such as those along University Drive just west of here, which can cause problems for power line maintenance workers. Eagles, attempting to protect their nest will attack the workers. Many power companies such as Cass County Electric have installed nesting poles, attempting to lure nesting eagles away from power line poles. We hope to attract a nesting pair on the pole east of here which was installed by Cass County Electric Cooperative in the fall of 2006.

## View a Bald Eagle

Due to a special permit, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has allowed the Red River Zoo to house and care for 2 of these amazing birds of prey, one male and one female. Both have injured wings and are no longer able to fly. If you want to observe nesting eagles a good place to go is Tamarac National Wildlife Refuge, north of Detroit Lakes, Minnesota.

