

# Northern Northern Bald Eagle

*Haliaeetus leucocephalus  
alascanus*

Class: Aves  
Order: Falconiformes  
Family: Accipitridae  
Genus: Haliaeetus

## Distribution

This northern subspecies, *H. l. alascanus*, occurs in northern and eastern Canada, the northern United States including Alaska. They range further south on the Atlantic coast. Numbers vary regionally.

## Habitat

They prefer areas with an abundance of lakes, large rivers, sea coasts and surrounding areas of old-growth and mature stands of trees.

## Food

These eagles feed largely on fish and carrion. Birds and small mammals such as muskrats, squirrels, and rabbits are also consumed.

## Reproduction

They are monogamous, and thought to pair for life. Courtship and nest building or repair occurs in late March. They use the same nesting area year after year. A mated pair often builds more than one nest in their nesting territory.



Eagles are frequent fliers all year round, easily seen along the coastal areas of Burntcoat Head Park.

Southern populations and northern coastal populations are largely resident, but inland Canadian and Alaskan birds may migrate south or to the coast during winter. In Nova Scotia they are both resident and migratory. They breed in this province and will remain close to their nesting sites in fall and winter as long as they can feed.

Trees selected for perching, roosting, and nesting must have good visibility, an open structure, and proximity to prey. Wintering habitat includes open coastal or brackish water near river estuaries where the eagles can still catch fish, and waterfowl. Bras d'Or Lake, Shubenacadie River, Minas Basin, and the South Shore region are well known wintering areas. In winter, bald eagles will also concentrate in agricultural areas such as the eastern Annapolis Valley, where farms provide eagles with a source of food from dead livestock and poultry.

Bald eagles can frequently be seen soaring or perched over water where they swoop down to catch any available fish. Cod, flounder, and eels are common summer food items in Cape Breton, while tomcod are an important winter food source in central Nova Scotia. They also scavenge for a large portion of their diet, eating stranded, injured, or dead animals. In winter, they will try to take ducks such as mergansers.

The aerie (nest) may take weeks to construct. The dimensions are large and increase in size with further seasonal modifications. More sticks are added each year. A typical nest may measure 1.0 to 1.3 m in diameter and can increase in time to 3 m in diameter. Aeries are lined with leaves and other vegetation. Eggs are usually laid in April. The timing of this varies somewhat regionally. She usually lays two eggs (pale blue to white). Both parents incubate the eggs but females do more of this than the males. Egg laying is once per year. A second clutch would only occur if the first did not survive.



### Development

Incubation of the eggs lasts 35 days. Although females do most of the incubating both parents feed the young at the nest. At least one adult is at the nest almost all of the time for the first two to three weeks.

### Characteristics

Adult birds, both male and female have a distinctive white head, neck and tail with a yellow beak and feet. This contrasts with the body feathers which are a dark brown, nearly black. Immature eagles have a mixture of brown and white all over with a black beak.

### Adaptations

Bald eagles are very powerful fliers with broad wings with deeply slotted tips which are ideal for soaring and long distance flying. They soar on thermal convection currents. They can reach speeds of 56 to 70 km per hour when gliding and flapping. When diving speed is between 120 and 160 km per hour and while carrying fish, or other prey items they can fly at 48 km per hour.

### Status/Threats

Considered an endangered species in the last century numbers have rebounded.

### Sightings in Nova Scotia

These are fairly common around bodies of water, especially in Cape Breton.

After five to six weeks, the attendance of parents usually drops off considerably (with the parents often perching in a nearby tree). A young eaglet can gain up to 170 g a day. By eight weeks, they are strong enough to flap their wings, lift their feet off the nest platform, and rise up in the air. The young fledge at anywhere from 8 to 14 weeks of age. They remain close to the nest and to their parents for a further six weeks. Juvenile eagles first start dispersing about eight weeks after they fledge. For the next four years, immature eagles wander widely in search of food until they attain adult plumage and are ready to find a mate.

As they mature young eagles gradually show more white on their heads and tails each year. The body feathers become a more overall, dark brown colour. The beak changes to yellow. Adult plumage doesn't develop fully until the eagle reaches sexual maturity at four to five years of age. At this point the head neck and tail are fully white. The eyes, cere, beak, legs, and feet are yellow, and the claws are black. Eagles are almost 1 m long with wing-spreads of 2 m to 2.5 m and weight 3 kg to 5.5 kg. Measurements vary regionally. Females are slightly larger than males.

Their talons are long and sharp for seizing prey. They are adept fishermen and often sit at some vantage point over water waiting for fish to rise, and then swoop to scoop one from the surface. They have exceptionally acute vision and strike at fish where they are, rather than where they appear to be due to refraction created by water. They will attack diving birds, especially osprey, and steal their catches of fish. They become somewhat migratory when water freezes over, and will move to areas of open water. When migration becomes necessary, routes are selected which provide the advantages of updrafts and thermals. Diurnal migrations utilize thermals produced by the sun.

Various regulations are in place to protect bald eagles. Loss of suitable habitat such as nesting trees and waterside habitats are an ongoing threat. They are extremely sensitive to human activity, and are found most commonly in areas free of human disturbance. Bald eagles remain susceptible to illegal shooting, accidental trapping, poisoning and electrocution. The banning of the pesticide DDT helped greatly in their recovery.

