Bald Eagles Return

Bald eagles have become a regular sight in Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP). In 2006 eagles built a nest in the Pinery Narrows, the first recorded in Cuyahoga County in more than 70 years. That nest was unsuccessful, but a pair returned to rebuild nearby and has since successfully raised eaglets. We expect the local population to grow over time.

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What Has Caused the Comeback of Eagles?

In 1975 bald eagles were close to extinction, with just four breeding pairs in Ohio. Today there are more than 200 breeding pairs in the state.

Banning the pesticide DDT in 1972 and establishing the Endangered Species Act in 1973, with its strong protective measures, have played a major role in their comeback.

Locally, efforts to improve water quality and preserve wetlands have transformed the Cuyahoga River into an attractive place for eagles to remain throughout the year. In 2007, after 40 years of conservation effort, the bald eagle was removed from the federal list of threatened and endangered species. As a federal species of concern, it still has strong protection under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act.

The eagles' return to the Cuyahoga Valley and other places nationwide is a great success story, showing that our efforts to care for the environment can make a difference.

Why Are Eagles Here?

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The Cuyahoga Valley, with expansive, secluded wooded wetlands and rebounding fish populations, has become an ideal place for eagles to feed and nest. The great blue heronry in the Pinery Narrows was a natural choice for the eagles' first nest location. Eagles prefer tall trees and pre-existing nests that they can expand.

Bald eagles have been steadily increasing throughout the nation. In Ohio the greatest concentration occurs along western Lake Erie near Sandusky, from where eagles have been dispersing to new areas.

Identifying Bald Eagles

Adult bald eagles are especially striking, with bright white heads and tails that contrast sharply with their solid brown bodies. Immature eagles lack the white head. Their coloring is uniformly dark brown with bright white on the underside of their wings close to their bodies. It takes five to six years before the birds develop adult plumage. Males and females appear identical in all phases of development.

Eagles are 30 to 43 inches in length and have a seven-foot wingspan. They soar with their wings nearly flat, not tilted up like turkey vultures.

Courtship and Nesting

Courtship begins in the fall and resumes in late January, when eagles perform amazing aerial displays. The pair plunges through the air in very high dives, locking their talons and breaking apart just when it looks as if they are going to crash to the ground. As outstanding as these displays are, it is believed that nest building is even more critical for establishing bonds. Bald eagles are monogamous and thought to mate for life.

Eagle nests are often found in marshes and swamps, and along rivers throughout Ohio. Typically, nests are located in large trees 50 to 100 feet above the ground and close to water, where the eagles can find ample fish. Eagles will use an existing nest, adding to it until it is an average of three to five feet across and three to six feet deep. It is lined with grass, moss, and sometimes cattails. Some eagle nests can weigh as much as a ton.

Incubation and Rearing Young

In late winter, eagles lay one to three (typically two) eggs approximately 36 hours apart to increase the chance that one of the eggs will hatch when conditions are most favorable. The eggs are incubated for approximately 35 days. Eggs hatch over the span of a few days, typically in April or early May. Both parents share the tasks of incubation and rearing young. Eagle eggs and young are extremely sensitive to cold temperatures, so adults must remain on the nest constantly. Human disturbance can disrupt this constant care, jeopardizing nesting success.

Young eagles remain in the nest 10 to 12 weeks, until July or early August. For nearly two months after their first flight they will frequently return to the nesting site to receive food from their parents.

Finding Food and Taking Flight

As exciting as it is to see an eagle, it is even more thrilling to watch its fishing skill. An eagle, with its incredible eyesight, can see a fish surfacing from up to two miles away, soar over the location, and then grab its prey using its extremely strong four-inch talons.

The Cuyahoga Valley eagles are known to forage between Canal Exploration Center and Bath Road along the Cuyahoga River. In winter, they are most commonly seen near open water. Bald eagles prefer to eat fish, but will also eat a variety of small mammals, birds, and sometimes carrion.

Adult bald eagles in Ohio are usually non-migratory and remain close to their nesting area throughout the year. Immature birds migrate sporadically from October through March. Once they are mature enough to breed (after three to four years), they usually nest within 100 miles of where they were born. This behavior, and the continued recovery of the Cuyahoga River valley, suggests a bright future for bald eagles in CVNP.

Observing Nesting Eagles With Care

Eagle pairs can be observed in the Pinery Narrows area north of Station Road Bridge Trailhead or in the southern end of the park near the Beaver Marsh.

Nesting eagles are highly sensitive to human foot traffic: please watch quietly using binoculars or a spotting scope from more than 200 yards, obey posted trail restrictions, and stay out of closed areas. Disturbance distracts eagles from sitting on their eggs and can result in breeding failure or abandoning the area as a future nesting site. You can help protect Cuyahoga Valley's eagles by observing in ways that ensure their success for years to come.

Note that all the photographs in this bulletin were taken in the Cuyahoga Valley, in compliance with rules to protect the nesting eagles.

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