

New River Gorge

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior
New River Gorge National River



Bald Eagles at New River Gorge

Only a few years ago seeing a bald eagle in New River Gorge was a rare sight. In recent years however, the thrilling experience of seeing a bald eagle soaring over the New River has become a much more common occurrence. Although eagles had been seen for several years in the gorge, the first confirmed breeding pair of eagles in



the park established a nest in the winter of 2009 to 2010. The nest was sighted in a large American sycamore tree on the downstream end of Brooks Island, in the southern part of New River Gorge National River. This pair of eagles laid two eggs in February 2010. For the next 34 to 35 days, the eagles were observed on a daily basis taking turns sitting on the eggs and soaring from the nest in search of food. Two eaglets hatched in March and were seen first taking flight in early June. In the winter of 2011 the adult eagles returned to breed again and three chicks were hatched in early March. The pair returned in 2012 and raised another two chicks.

While observing bald eagles engaging in nesting behavior is a thrilling sight, we need to be cautious to not disturb eagles in this critical time of their life cycle. Nesting eagles are highly sensitive to human activity. Disturbing eagles during nesting distracts the eagles from sitting on their eggs and can result in breeding failure or may cause the eagles to abandon the nest. The National Park Service plans to close 330 feet of shoreline on each side of Brooks Island, centered on the downstream tip. Please observe closure notices and do not anchor under the nest, land boats near the nest, or go onshore on the island within 330 feet of the nest.

Identifying Bald Eagles

While the unmistakable white head and tail of an adult bald eagle make it quite easy to identify, juveniles are a little more tricky. Adult bald eagles are large birds with a wingspan of 6 ½ to 7 feet. The female is usually slightly larger than the male. Other than size, males and females look identical; white head and tail feathers, yellow bill and feet, and golden eyes.

Immature bald eagles lack the white head. Their tail, head, and body feathers are mottled brown with some white in the wing linings. It can take five years for a bald eagle to gradually develop full adult plumage. Juvenile bald eagles lacking the white head and tail may be confused with golden eagles.

When soaring, an eagles wings are nearly flat, not tilted up like the more common turkey vulture.



photo by David Hypes

Bald Eagle Life History

Bald eagles, the national symbol of the United States, were on the verge of extinction in the 1970's. The decline of eagles came from a triple threat of human impacts: development along riverbanks, lakeshores, and wetlands that claimed the tall mature trees and spaces needed by eagles to comfortably nest and hunt, the thoughtless killing of eagles by people from fear or for trophies, and the deadly impacts of chemical pollution. The widespread use of the pesticide DDT from the late 1940's until its ban in the 1970's, slowly polluted our nation's waterways eventually contaminating the aquatic ecosystem, causing female eagles to lay eggs with abnormally thin shells that would break during incubation.

The preservation of publically owned wild lands by national and state parks, forests, and refuges, the passage of the Endangered Species Act and other protective legislation, plus the monitoring and controls on air and water pollution by state and national environmental protection agencies have brought about the resurgence of the bald eagle to our nation.

Both birds of a breeding pair share the responsibilities of building the nests, incubating the eggs and feeding the young eaglets. Nests are reused and expanded over the years sometimes growing to 5 feet in diameter, 3 feet in depth, and weighing several hundred to over one thousand pounds.

Observing Nesting Eagles With Care

The best location to observe the eagle nest is from Brooks Overlook on Route 20, approximately five miles south of Sandstone Visitor Center. There is a small pull-off there with a fantastic view of the river and Brooks Island. Route 20 is a busy road with blind turns. Please be sure to park completely off the road and be aware of traffic. The nest is in a large sycamore tree at the northwest, or downstream, tip of the island. During winter months, the eagles will usually be seen on or near the nest. One eagle will always be on the nest while eggs are incubating. The eagles can be best observed with binoculars or a spotting scope.



In West Virginia, nest building takes place from December to February. Egg laying typically begins in late January or February with two to three eggs incubating about 35 days. After hatching the eaglets spend 10 to 12 weeks in the nest. Initially they are brooded closely by at least one parent, but later they are left increasingly alone as both parents hunt to provide them with food.

Mature eagles usually return to within 100 miles of where they hatched to nest on their own. Bald eagles feed mainly on fish but will also prey on mammals, reptiles, other birds, and carrion.



Please remember that eagles are highly sensitive to human disturbance. They are best viewed from a distance. People boating on the river should avoid landing on the downstream end of the island, anchoring under the nest, or approaching to within 330 feet of the nest. Disturbing eagles during nesting can cause them to abandon the nest. Even driving them away from the nest for a short time can cause the eggs to get too cold, resulting in death for the unborn eaglet. They are still very sensitive to human activity after the eaglets hatch. Driving the eagles from the nest during this time can cause nestlings to miss feedings which can affect their survival. Disturbance can also startle the young, causing them to fall out of the nest before they are able to fly.

Bald eagles and their nests are protected by law. It is illegal to "pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap, collect, molest, or disturb" any bald eagle. Violations can result in a criminal fine of \$100,000, imprisonment for one year, or both.

Eagles are an important component of the natural ecosystem. They are indicators of a healthy river environment and are exciting to observe. Please help us to insure that they will continue to nest at New River Gorge National River.