

QUESTIONS MOST OFTEN ASKED ABOUT THE BALD EAGLE

1. When is the best time to see bald eagles at the Shepaug Dam?

This is difficult to predict because it is highly variable due to weather conditions, migratory movements and food availability.

2. Where do our winter eagles come from?

Some of our visitors call Connecticut their home. Most come from Maine, Massachusetts, New York, Ontario, Quebec, and the Maritime Provinces.

3. Why do the eagles come to Connecticut during the winter? Why do their numbers change as winter progresses?

Bald eagles are responding to weather patterns and their consequences. Severe cold up north freezes up bodies of water locking eagles out of fishing areas. Since their preferred food is fish, they move south looking for food. If Connecticut should have a severe cold spell, causing ice lockup, the eagles would continue south to open water.

4. How far south will they go?

The eagles will fly as far as it takes to reach open water or a steady food supply. Northern eagles will travel to Virginia and Maryland, if necessary.

5. What foods do bald eagles commonly utilize?

The primary food source of the bald eagle is fish. Other important foods include waterfowl, carrion and small game.

6. What is the size of Connecticut's wintering bald eagle population?

On average, 80 individual birds, although the numbers are increasing. Each winter will, of course, vary depending on how severe the winter is. Most of this wintering population is found along the Connecticut River.

7. Why are bald eagles threatened?

Reasons for the decline are the following: human disturbances at nest sites; loss of nesting trees; pollution of food, especially by pesticides, with subsequent ill effects on health and reproductive efforts; intentional and accidental shooting and trapping; and most importantly going forward, loss of waterside habitat due to human occupation.

8. Why is it important to safeguard wintering eagles?

Since winter is a stressful time for eagles, it is important that their energy be preserved. If birds are frequently disturbed from feeding and forced to travel to a different area for food, a threatening situation for the eagles may result.

9. What is eagle harassment?

Harassment may be defined as any activity that interrupts a life supporting activity. Merely forcing a bird to take flight for a photo can qualify.

10. Does the observation area disturb the eagles?

Eagles typically have a low tolerance for unpredictable human behavior. However, it is felt that the combination of the observation area being located at a safe distance from their favorite perch sites and the control of the visiting public through observance of site rules has eliminated the disturbance potential. Eagle reaction to visitor presence has been and continues to be monitored.

11. Do eagles nest in Connecticut?

Yes, in 1992, for the first time in 41 years, a pair of eagles made Connecticut their home and raised a new generation of eagles. Twenty one years later, there were 25 nesting pairs raising 41 chicks. Although Connecticut is limited in habitat for eagles, this is a positive result of protection efforts.

12. How big are bald eagles' nests?

Nests are large, commonly 5 to 7 feet wide and 3 to 5 feet deep, built in trees 10 to 150 feet above ground. Bald eagles may also nest on rocky cliffs, and in rare instances, on the ground.

13. How big is a bald eagle?

Bald eagles range in length from 34 to 43 inches and have wing spans of 6 to 7 1/2 feet. As in other birds of prey, males are slightly smaller than females.

14. How much does a bald eagle weigh?

Males weigh from 8 to 9 pounds. Females are larger, with weights between 10 to 14 pounds. Golden eagles are similar in both length and weight but are not closely related to bald eagles.

15. How long do bald eagles live in the wild?

Bald eagles are suspected to live from 25 to 30 years in the wild.

16. At what age do bald eagles mature?

Bald eagles reach sexual maturity at four to six years of age.

17. How do you distinguish between male and female bald eagles?

Both sexes appear identical, except females are slightly larger.

18. How many eggs do bald eagles lay?

The average clutch size is two dull white eggs. Competition between young often leads to the death of one nestling. However, bald eagle pairs in the Chesapeake Bay area have been known to successfully fledge up to four young in recent years.

19. At what age do bald eagles get their white heads?

Bald eagles obtain their adult plumage, white head and tail, when they are four to five years of age.

20. How well can a bald eagle see?

The diameter of an eagle's eye is comparable to the size of a grown man's, but their vision is roughly six times better. Some research suggests that in order to clearly see form, distance, and motion, eagles may not have color vision.

21. Some neighboring New England states have had successful eagle reintroduction programs. What about Connecticut?

Connecticut never did establish such a program due to expense, the personnel needed and a perceived lack of suitable habitat. With protection efforts having positive results, and local populations building up naturally, this was shown to be a wise decision.

22. Do bald eagles mate for life?

They are believed to mate for life. If one dies, the other will re-nest if it finds a new mate.

23. Is the bald eagle still protected as an endangered species?

In August, 2007 they were removed from protection as a Federal Endangered Species because of the success of this program. However, they are still protected under other Federal Acts. Connecticut still protects them as threatened on the state level, due to lack of nesting habitat. Bald eagles have not been and are not now endangered in Alaska and have never existed in Hawaii.

24. How much weight can a bald eagle carry?

Bald eagles can carry up to four pounds in flight. They are able to catch larger prey but they can't remove it from the site where it was caught.

25. Can individual eagles be told apart?

There is not easy way to tell individual adult eagles apart, but on occasion, minor feather differences arise. The only guaranteed method is by reading the tag number on a marked eagle.

26. Why do eagles seem so inactive?

Winter is a physically stressful time for the eagles, and therefore, the conservation of energy is important for the survival of individual birds. The condition of adult birds in springtime will affect their reproductive success, so, the eagles' winter "inactivity" is also important to the species survival.

27. How much do bald eagles eat?

Bald eagles consume between one and one and a half pounds of fish or other meat daily.

28. Why do the bald eagles come to the dam?

The bald eagles are attracted to this section of the river because flows from hydro electric generation keep the river clear of ice, making it possible for them to fish. Also, when the turbines are operating, the turbulent water cause fish to come to the surface, thus making it easier for the eagles to feed.

29. How fast can bald eagles fly?

During migration, eagles have been clocked at between 36 and 44 MPH.

30. Why can't the terms perch, roost and nest be used interchangeable?

These terms refer to three separate activities.

Perch: A bird perches, or sits, during the day when it isn't flying or feeding.

Roost: A roosting bird is one which is spending the night in one spot in order to sleep. The place where this is done is called a roost site. Roost sites and perch sites are typically not the same. In fact, a roost site may be up to five miles away from a perch site.

Nest: Nesting is another word for breeding. Bald eagles nest in the spring and summer.

31. Why do birds preen?

A Preening bird is one which is taking care of its plumage. In order to keep the individual feathers whole and water repellent, a bird needs to clean and comb them, conditioning them with oil from a gland at the base of its tail.