

Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

NMPIF level: Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 (BC2)

NMPIF assessment score: 12

NM stewardship responsibility: Low

National PIF status: Stewardship

New Mexico BCRs: 16, 18, 34, 35

Primary breeding habitat(s): Middle-elevation Riparian, Southwest Riparian, Emergent Wetlands and Lakes

Summary of Concern

Bald Eagle has recovered significantly in numbers since it was federally listed as endangered in 1967 (the species was recently delisted). In New Mexico, near the southern periphery of the breeding range, localized nesting has increased in recent decades. The state population remains small and breeding birds are sensitive to disturbance.

Associated Species

Double-crested Cormorant, Great Blue Heron, Osprey, California Gull

Distribution

Although the largest breeding concentrations are in Alaska and Canada, Bald Eagles may be present in suitable aquatic habitat throughout most of the continental U.S. Large breeding populations occur in Great Lakes states, the Pacific Northwest, Chesapeake Bay and Florida, and are building in the northern Rocky Mountains and along the Gulf Coast. Breeding in the Southwest is limited, but has increased in recent years.

In New Mexico, Bald Eagles may occur locally in summer at several locations throughout the state, including primarily Colfax and Sierra counties. The species is relatively common in the winter and during migration, along watercourses and reservoirs (Buehler 2000, Parmeter et al. 2002).

Ecology and Habitat Requirements

Bald Eagles typically breed in forested areas adjacent to bodies of water. Breeding habitat is generally mature or old-growth forest with some habitat edge, relatively close to suitable foraging areas. Distance of territories to water varies within and among populations, depending on the type and quality of foraging opportunities (Buehler 2000). Where possible, Bald Eagles select habitat away from areas of human disturbance and development (Anthony and Isaacs 1989, Wood et al. 1989). Forest patches with nests have relatively open canopies, and some form of habitat discontinuity or edge. Foraging areas have tall, easily accessible trees for perching. Most perch trees used are live trees, although dead trees preferred if available (Stalmaster 1987).

In New Mexico, Bald Eagles typically nest in large trees, often ponderosa pine or cottonwood, with exposed branches strong enough to support the large nest. The same nest tree may be reused for many years. Nest trees are generally near lakes or reservoirs. Nest construction may begin as early as February, and a single brood is raised throughout the summer. Bald Eagles hunt from high perches and while soaring. Although fish is a prominent part of the diet in some areas, the species is an opportunistic forager. In New Mexico, the diet includes mammals such as jack rabbits, prairie dogs, and even pocket gophers (Williams 1999, Buehler 2000).

Conservation Status

Species Assessment

DISTRIBUTION	2
THREATS	3
GLOBAL POPULATION SIZE	4
LOCAL POPULATION TREND	2
IMPORTANCE OF NEW MEXICO TO BREEDING	1
COMBINED SCORE	12

Bald Eagle is a Biodiversity Conservation Concern, Level 2 species for New Mexico, with a total assessment score of 12. It receives a high vulnerability score of 4 from PIF for its relatively small population size. Bald Eagle is listed as threatened in the state of New Mexico. The species was removed from the list of federally threatened and endangered species in the fall of 2007.

Population Size

PIF estimates a species population of 330,000. Size of the small New Mexico breeding population is unknown, probably less than 10 pairs.

Population Trend

Range-wide, numbers have increased significantly since initial federal listing in 1967 and U.S. ban of DDT in 1972. Survey-wide BBS data for 1966-2004 show significant increases (annual trend = 6.1, $p = 0.02$, $n = 228$). Breeding populations have expanded or become newly established in the Southwest in recent decades. This species is not sampled by BBS in New Mexico.

Threats

Bald Eagles have been shot and poisoned, sometimes in large numbers, and some illegal killing continues to occur. Pesticides may continue to affect some populations. Elevated levels of lead in blood, probably from ingestion of ammunition in hunter-killed birds or mammals, have been recorded. Loss of shoreline nesting, perching, roosting, and associated aquatic foraging habitat to human development may limit expansion of breeding populations in many areas (Fraser et al. 1996). Human disturbance around Bald Eagle nests may cause abandonment; this is perhaps the greatest danger faced by eagles breeding in New Mexico.

Management Issues and Recommendations

Management for Bald Eagles in New Mexico should focus on limiting human disturbance in active nesting areas.

NMPIF Recommendations

- Identify, monitor, and reduce disturbance around active nest sites.
- Protect riparian habitat, including retention of large snags, along rivers and lake shores statewide.
- Maintain prairie dog towns within foraging range of Bald Eagle nesting areas.

Species Conservation Objectives

NMPIF Objectives

- Continue to survey for additional breeding locations.
- Maintain or increase current populations.

Sources of Information

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