

CONSERVATION SECTION

CONSERVATION COMMITTEE REPORT ON STATUS OF EAGLES

Bald (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) and Golden (*Aquila chrysaetos*) eagles historically occurred in suitable habitats throughout the U.S. and Canada. With settlement, populations of eagles came into conflict with man principally through man's use and alteration of habitats necessary for maintenance of eagle populations. Such conflicts increased in the 1900's. Consequently, the food base of eagles was altered, food chains were contaminated by pesticides, preferred nesting areas were destroyed or otherwise rendered unusable, and attractive (to eagles) hazards were placed in areas historically used by them. Because of widespread publicity about deaths of eagles in recent years the Conservation Committee of The Wilson Ornithological Society undertook the task of reviewing the present status and problems of eagles in North America. Major problems encountered with management of eagles are:

1. Maintenance of suitable nesting and feeding habitats
2. Reduction of man-caused mortalities
 - a) Poisoning
 - b) Shooting
 - c) Electrocutation

HISTORICAL RÉSUMÉ

In North America, man has historically attempted to reduce or eliminate eagles whenever conflicts have arisen in use of commodities desired by man. These conflicts have been most intense and widely publicized in situations where eagles (primarily Golden) have preyed, or have been alleged to prey on domestic livestock. Numerous articles containing both fact and fiction have been written concerning eagle-livestock problems in western North America. Because of alleged and actual predation on young livestock (principally sheep and goats) by eagles, ranchers have made concerted efforts through shooting and poisoning to reduce or eliminate eagles and other large birds of prey from their livestock ranges. Other problems have arisen through destruction of cliff and tree nesting sites used by eagles, reduction of the amount of foraging area near nest areas, release of pollutants into the environment which can cause either death or reduction of reproductive ability, erection of power poles without proper safeguards against potential electrocution, and casual shooting for sport and sale of feathers. Bald Eagles have had legal protection in most areas since 1940, while Golden Eagles were essentially unprotected over major portions of their range until the early 1960's.

PRESENT STATUS

Bald Eagles still occupy most if not all of their historic range although most state conservation departments and knowledgeable individuals contacted report far fewer Bald Eagles than were believed to have occurred historically. Major changes in reproductive performance of Bald Eagles have occurred in some areas, especially in the eastern and southeastern U.S., since the late 1940's. Recent data indicate that the downward trend in reproductive success has slowed if not stopped. In the upper midwest,

Canada and Alaska, all indications are that Bald Eagles are doing well in nesting success and fledging of young. While accurate data on numbers of Bald Eagles are lacking for many areas, approximately 1,000 nesting pairs occur in the lower 48 states with a great many more in Canada and Alaska. It is probable that the continental population of Bald Eagles is between 35,000–60,000 birds, most of these occurring in Alaska and Canada. Bald Eagles have been legally protected in the U.S., except in Alaska, since the Bald Eagle Act of 1940. Overall direct man-caused mortality of Bald Eagles has decreased primarily because of eliminating bounties on them in Alaska; it probably accounts for fewer than 500 Bald Eagle deaths each year. This reduction in the loss of eagles in Alaska has been partially offset by increased habitat alteration and food contamination with pesticides south of the international boundary with Canada.

Populations of Golden Eagles appear to be sizable, reproductively healthy, and stable over much of their historic range west of the Mississippi River. East of this area, few Golden Eagles persist. They are essentially extirpated in the eastern U.S., apparently as the result of loss of suitable foraging areas due to fire control and intensive agriculture.

Attempts to reduce, eliminate or control Golden Eagles have occurred in localized areas where raising of sheep and/or goats are important. These control efforts were common prior to 1963, when Golden Eagles were given additional protection under the amended Bald Eagle Act. Efforts to control eagles continued even after this date in some western states under special provisions of the 1963 law. With the disclosure of substantial numbers of eagle deaths through aerial shooting and poisoning in the early 1970's, federal and state agencies increased their surveillance of eagles with the result that illegal killing of eagles in western North America may be at its lowest level since 1900.

With interest in eagles at a high level, another major mortality factor for eagles (primarily young just learning to fly) was identified in the early 1970's. Electrocutation of Golden Eagles (mostly) is apparently not recent in origin but has become more common with the advent of increased numbers and kilometers of power lines. Fortunately, not all power lines are harmful to eagles and recent research has provided several solutions to this problem. Most utility companies, eager to improve their public relations, are modifying their line attachment to poles whenever problems with eagle deaths are reported to them. Despite these problems and those associated with reduced foraging areas due to increased urbanization and irrigation, and casual shooting of any large bird of prey, Golden Eagles are holding their own and it is estimated that up to 100,000 individuals occur in North America.

SUMMARY

Populations of eagles in North America have been substantially reduced in many areas of their former range. This is especially true for both species of eagles in the eastern U.S. Major reasons for reduction in populations are related to habitat alteration, contamination of foods with pesticides, and shooting. Populations of eagles breeding in Alaska, Canada and the western U.S. appear to have been little affected although substantial man-induced mortality has been documented. Continental populations of Bald Eagles may be as high as 35,000–60,000 individuals with a North American population of up to 100,000 Golden Eagles. Major problems still remain in order to maintain eagle populations in the 48 contiguous states. This is especially true for the Bald Eagle. Identifiable threats to stable eagle populations are: loss of feeding and nesting sites due to man's activities, pesticide contamination of foods, illegal shooting in areas devoted

to sheep and/or goat ranching, electrocution, and shooting for commercial and "sporting" reasons. Due to publicity about deaths of eagles and increased awareness of values of all raptors, federal and state agencies have made commendable efforts to decrease illegal shooting of eagles and to increase their knowledge concerning numbers and biology of eagles and other birds of prey.

For specific detailed data from which this report was prepared, contact Dr. C. E. Braun, Wildlife Research Center, P.O. Box 2287, Ft. Collins, CO 80522.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Federal and state agencies should identify and protect all concentrations of nesting eagles on public lands. Where unusual nesting concentrations occur, it may be desirable to establish refuges for the protection of nesting birds. Locations of eyries should not be publicized.
2. Utility companies should be encouraged to eliminate all hazardous perches on transmission lines.
3. Increased research should be supported by livestock interests in order to ascertain exact cause of death of newly born lambs and kids in herderless pastures.
4. Education of sportsmen and recreationists concerning the value of large raptors must be given major emphasis by federal and state land management and conservation agencies.
5. The ban on use of toxic substances such as thallium and sodium monofluoroacetate (1080) must continue on public lands. If other alternatives are not available, use of poisons should be carefully controlled and supervised by trained personnel.
6. Traps used in capture of predatory animals should be modified to prevent crushing of the legs of eagles and other raptors.
7. Efforts to reduce and eliminate contamination of the environment with persistent pesticides should be continued.
8. Hunting any wildlife by plane should be outlawed. Pilots convicted of aiding in the molesting of federally protected species such as eagles should have their license suspended or revoked by the Federal Aviation Administration.
9. Ranchers who lease public lands for grazing and who are convicted of molesting raptors should have their lease applications denied by the responsible state or federal agency.
10. Additional research should be conducted in determining the origin of wintering eagles, especially in the western U.S.
11. Where eagles have been extirpated, introduction techniques should be researched and implemented.
12. Where large concentrations of nesting raptors exist, efforts should be made to maintain significant portions of the plant-animal communities in a "natural" (relatively undisturbed) condition. This will help insure that appropriate prey species are available to the raptors.

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