

# Bald Eagle



ASSESSING HABITAT QUALITY FOR PRIORITY WILDLIFE SPECIES IN COLORADO WETLANDS

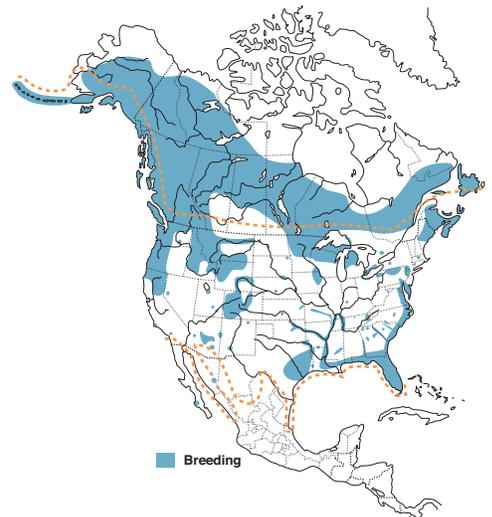


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## Species Distribution

### Range

Bald eagles live almost entirely within North America. Their distribution is highly scattered throughout North America and in Colorado. Up-to-date maps of their distribution in Colorado are unavailable due to their sensitive status.



North America map used by permission from Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Birds of North America Online (<http://bna.birds.cornell.edu/bna>). Colorado map based on Andrews and Righter (1992), Kingery (1998), COB-BAII (2015), and CFO (2015).

Bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, Family *Accipitridae*) prefer tall, mature trees for perching and nesting. From these perches, they watch for fish or other small prey.

## Species Description

### Identification

Our national emblem, the bald eagle, is distinguished by its white head and tail contrasting with a dark brown body in its full adult form. Immature bald eagles (first four years) may have light or brown heads and tails; they can best be distinguished from immature golden eagles by the light leading edge of the wing contrasting with darker flight feathers.

### Preferred Habitats

The most important wetland habitats for bald eagles are those connected with large bodies of water, such as rivers and reservoirs. Bald eagles use tall trees and dead snags along the edge of waterbodies to perch and watch for prey.

### Diet

Bald eagles are opportunistic foragers. They prefer fish when available, but also consume small mammals and birds, especially during winter.

### Conservation Status

The U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed bald eagles from the Federal list of endangered species in 2007 (USFWS 2007). In Colorado, bald eagles are listed as a Tier 2 Species of Greatest Conservation Need (CPW 2015). The number of bald eagle pairs breeding in Colorado increased from 14 pairs during Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas I (1987–1994) to 148 pairs during Colorado Breeding Bird Atlas II (2007–2011).

# Preferred Habitat Conditions

Distance between tall trees and open water with fish	the closer the better, best within 1 mile
Distance from human disturbance	varies with location; 100 to >500 yards
Dominant vegetation	open canopy and easy-to-access large trees with open horizontal branches
Tree size	mature, tall, large-diameter trees for perching and nesting

## Management Recommendations

This fact sheet contains easy-to-use guidelines for understanding habitat needs of Colorado Parks and Wildlife priority wetland-dependent wildlife. A number of practical steps can be taken to improve habitat for bald eagles.

### Hydrology

- Maintain water levels to maximize prey availability and foraging.
- Manage for a diversity of fish.

### Vegetation

- Thin dense forests (particularly in the vicinity of reservoirs), burn by prescription, and selectively harvest to achieve desired open canopy.
- Avoid clearcutting.
- Manage for age diversity and species diversity.
- Protect existing tall, large-diameter trees, including open-top trees and snags.
- Promote growth of trees in areas where lacking.
- Create super-canopy trees (much taller than the rest) by cutting.
- Revegetate with trees where appropriate.
- Create or protect openings that are  $\geq 8.5$  acres within 2 miles of shoreline; maintain these openings with sparsely-spaced roosting and/or nesting trees.

### Contamination

- Reduce contaminants.

### Land Use

- Reduce visual contact with disturbance using vegetation strips 8–100 yards wide.
- Minimize development along shorelines.

### Conservation

- Preserve undeveloped shores and adjacent forests.
- Maintain mosaic of wetlands in different successional stages.



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### Acknowledgements

Chase Taylor (Rocky Mountain Bird Observatory) reviewed an earlier version and provided input on preferred habitat conditions.

### Suggested Reading and Citations

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# Habitat Scorecard for Bald Eagles (v. Jan 2016)

## *Assessment of habitat before and after restoration or management actions*

Project Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date(s) of Assessment: \_\_\_\_\_

**Instructions:** Enter one value that best describes early to mid-summer conditions of each habitat variable, using the numbers in the value column. Habitat variables are in shaded boxes; ranges of condition are directly below each variable. If condition is outside range or is not described, enter a zero.

Key habitat variable and conditions	Value	Before	After
<b>Dominant vegetation</b>			
Open canopy with dominant snag or tall trees with open horizontal branches	18.5		
<b>Distance to permanent open water capable of supporting fish from a live or dead tree &gt;30 feet tall</b>			
<55 yards	17.5		
55 yards – 1 mile	11.7		
>1 – 2 miles	5.8		
<b>Percent total canopy cover that is &gt;6.5 feet</b>			
10 – 40%	17.5		
>40 – 60%	11.7		
>60 – 100%	5.8		
<b>Height of tallest tree within 100 yards of focal area</b>			
>50 feet	17.5		
>30 – 50 feet	11.7		
15 – 30 feet	5.8		
<b>Distance from development</b>			
>0.3 mile	10.3		
0.2 – 0.3 miles	6.8		
100 yards – 0.2 miles	3.4		
<b>Apparent water depth</b>			
<20 feet deep within 100 yards of shore	14.5		
<20 feet deep within 50 yards from shore but deeper beyond	9.7		
>20 feet deep within 50 yards from shore	4.8		
<b>Total (of 100 possible): add all numbers in before or after columns</b>			