

A California Riceland Success Story

The extensive area of winter-flooded rice in the Sacramento Valley has likely played a part in the recovery of the Bald Eagle by supporting large numbers of waterfowl, an important prey base for eagles that may enhance their overwinter survival.

BALD EAGLE
Haliaeetus leucocephalus

Current and past population data

After historic declines from shooting, trapping, poisoning, and, more recently, pesticide contamination, the California population of breeding Bald Eagles increased from about 30 pairs in 1977 to over 300 in 2010. Some pairs are now nesting in the Sacramento Valley along major rivers such as the Sacramento and Feather. The number of eagles increased marginally on midwinter surveys in California from 1986 to 2005.

Information regarding each species' benefit to rice growers

No direct benefit to rice growers documented, but aesthetic pleasure is easily derived from watching these majestic birds.



CALIFORNIA RICE

BALD EAGLE

Haliaeetus leucocephalus



SPECIES IN FOCUS

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BALD EAGLE

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Appearance



Size: 28–38 in

Weight: 6.6–13.9 lbs

Adult plumage, attained at 5 ½ years, is striking and unmistakable, with all white head and tail contrasting with dark body and wings. Large bill, iris, and legs and feet yellow. For younger birds, plumage is highly variable depending on timing and sequence of molt and individuals' age. These birds generally are dark brown with variable amounts of white on head, body, and underwings. Like most raptors, females are about 25 percent larger than males.



Range

Extensive breeding populations in Alaska, Canada, the Pacific Northwest, Great Lakes

region, and mid-Atlantic coast south through Florida. Also regional and local breeding throughout most of the remaining states and in northern Mexico. The majority of the wintering population is in coastal Alaska, coastal Canada, and the lower 48 states; limited occurrence in Mexico.

Habitat



At all seasons this species is associated with aquatic habitats, such as extensive areas of managed wetlands, large rivers, coastal estuaries, and large reservoirs. Prime areas host a diverse, abundant, and vulnerable prey base and have

limited human disturbance. Nests placed near the top of large trees (rarely on cliffs or ground) isolated from human development and disturbance but relatively close to water with suitable prey. Roost sites providing protection from inclement weather are important in winter.

Food/feeding



An opportunistic forager that hunts from a perch or while soaring, attempting to take most prey in flight. Also feeds on dead animals extensively when available and found in disturbance-free areas. Will steal food from other eagles, other birds (such as osprey and herons), and mammals. The variable diet generally includes a strong preference for fish but also many birds and mammals and occasionally reptiles and large invertebrates.

Behavior



May repeatedly stoop on waterfowl on the water, often with poor success. May float on surface of water and use wings in “rowing” motion in water too deep to wade or if bird is too wet to fly from water's surface. Forms nighttime communal roosts in nonbreeding season, departing rapidly at dawn to visit foraging areas.

Predation

Eggs and nestlings preyed on by crows, gulls, hawks and owls, and various mammals. Mammals may prey on adult and immature eagles in poor condition from starvation, injury, or disease or on recently fledged young on the ground.



Conservation Status



Protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act and Migratory Bird Treaty Act. Formerly a Federally Endangered species, but no longer after increases in nesting pairs, productivity, and distribution following a ban on use of the harmful pesticide DDT. As a breeding bird, now on the federal list of Birds of Conservation Concern. In California, this eagle is a Fully Protected species and formerly was listed as State Endangered.

Benefits of rice cultivation to species/group

Bald Eagles are attracted to the large numbers of waterfowl that concentrate in winter-flooded rice fields.

Additional benefits of adjacent managed wetlands to species/group

Waterfowl concentrations in managed wetlands of federal refuges, state wildlife areas, and private duck clubs are also an important food source for Bald Eagles wintering in the Sacramento Valley.