



The Bald Eagle



Classification	Bird (Raptor)
Diet	Fish, small mammals, waterfowl, carrion, small birds.
Habitat	Wetlands, river corridors, lake areas.
Size	Length: 3-4 ft. Weight: 10-12 lbs. Wingspan: 6-7 ft.

If you ever find yourself along Lake Erie, one of Ohio's inland waterways, or wildlife areas you might catch a glimpse of Ohio's biggest bird of prey, the bald eagle.

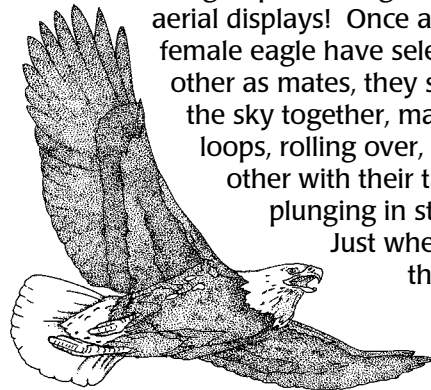
You can spot adult bald eagles by their pure white heads and white tails. Young eagles are all brown and don't get their white coloring until they are 4-5 years old. Their eyes, beaks, and feet are bright yellow. Their voice is a high pitched, squeaky cackle or chatter.

The bald eagle, as with all wildlife, needs food, shelter, water, and space. They hunt during the day and sleep at night. Eagles like to be close to water sources such as **wetlands** and river areas. This is where they can find their favorite food, fish. They will catch and eat small birds and mammals, too. This is why they are called a **raptor**, or bird of prey. A bald eagle is very good at catching fish, dipping to the surface of the water and coming up with a fish in its **talons**, or claws. An eagle's talon can be up to 4 inches long and they have **spicules**, or tiny spikes, on their toes to help them hold the slippery fish.

They also have been known to stand in streams and use their beaks or talons to grab fish swimming upstream. In the winter, eagles

will turn to **carrion**, or dead animals, as other sources of food are limited. Bald eagles have very good hearing and extremely good eyesight. A bald eagle can see up to 8 times better than humans and can see a fish surfacing up to 2 miles away.

Fall is the season for bald eagles to find mates. This is when you will see pairs of eagles performing their amazing aerial displays! Once a male and female eagle have selected each other as mates, they soar through the sky together, making big loops, rolling over, grabbing each other with their talons and plunging in steep dives.



Just when you think they are going to crash, they break apart and fly upward to start over

again. Eagles perform this sky dance until they are ready to build a nest.

Nesting begins in early spring. The eagle pair usually builds the nest together. The nest, or **aerie (AIR-ee)**, is made of branches and sticks that the eagles collect from the ground. Often eagles will use an old nest and simply add to it each year. A nest can get as big as twenty feet wide and nine feet deep. Eagles prefer to nest in high, remote places far away from any disturbance. To see an eagle nest is a treat. But if too many people get too close to an eagle nest, the adults may abandon it.

Most female eagles will lay two eggs. They usually lay their eggs in February. The female will sit on the eggs for about 5 weeks. The male brings her food and will occasionally take a turn sitting on the eggs. When the **eaglets** hatch, their eyes will be open, but they will be very weak and helpless. For the first 4 to 5 weeks the eaglets are covered with soft gray down. After the fifth week, they will begin growing their feathers. When they are 2 1/2 months old, they will grow their flight feathers, or fledge. They are then able to leave the nest. They will be quite inexperienced in their first years and this is the toughest time for an eagle. They have to learn how to catch their own food, learn what is dangerous, and learn to take care of themselves.

Even though bald eagles don't have any natural **predators**, human activities are their greatest threat. In spite of being our national symbol, this magnificent bird has had to overcome serious problems. Since Ohio was first settled, pollution and habitat loss have caused bald eagle populations to decline drastically. By 1975, there were only four pairs of bald eagles left on Lake Erie. Through habitat protection and reintroduction programs from the Division of Wildlife, there are almost 20 times as many pairs in Ohio today. The future of the bald eagle in Ohio looks brighter due to constant monitoring, nest observations, and keeping records on young eaglets. Whether future Ohioans will be able to see soaring bald eagles will be determined by how humans manage **habitat**.