

Bald Eagles at Quabbin Reservoir

After decades of absence due to hunting and the loss of their forest habitat, Bald Eagles were observed as the Quabbin Reservoir neared completion in the 1940's. The large expanse of open water surrounded by forest attracted the birds from Northern New England and Canada in search of food during the winter months. These wintering birds would depart in early spring to return to their nesting sites up North.

But the sight of a Bald Eagle at Quabbin became increasingly rare once again in the 1950's as the birds' population dropped throughout North America. The drop was a result of increased use of DDT, a pesticide which interfered with reproduction and reduced the number of birds that successfully hatched.

Recovery Efforts

Although DDT was banned in 1972, the Bald Eagle population was slow to recover. To help the birds widen their breeding range and to bring nesting eagles back to Quabbin Reservoir, the Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife initiated the Bald Eagle Hacking Program in 1982.

Based on the medieval methods to train hunting falcons, hacking had been used successfully in other areas to reintroduce eagles. Massachusetts biologists chose Quabbin Reservoir to attempt this program because of its wilderness character and the availability of fish.



Young eagle shown in carrying case.
Photo by Dale Monette, DCR

Hacking the Eagles

In 1982 the first eagles were transplanted to Quabbin Reservoir. At around 6 weeks of age the birds were taken from a nesting site in Manitoba, Canada, where a thriving bald eagle population already existed. This timing was vital to the success of the program if the birds were to imprint on Quabbin Reservoir and return to the area to nest as adults.

Once the birds arrived here, they were settled into specially constructed nesting platforms. To ensure that the young eagles retained their fear of humans, their human caretakers had no contact with them, feeding them fish and carrion from behind a blind. At approximately 12 weeks when their feathers began to mature, the eagles were encouraged to fly from the platforms, with Quabbin and MA Wildlife staff on hand to monitor and rescue the birds if needed. The program was ended in 1988 with the hope that at least some of the 41 young eagles released at the Reservoir would return to nest here.



Young eagles preparing to fly off hacking platform
Photo by Dale Monette, DCR



Bald Eagle at Quabbin Reservoir Photo by Bill Byrne, Mass Wildlife

Return of the Eagles

In 1989, Quabbin celebrated the return of the bald eagles, when two nesting pairs successfully fledged three young at the reservoir. Today the Bald Eagle Hacking Program is considered an unqualified success, with an average of 8 nesting pairs of the birds each year at Quabbin and with other birds fledged at the reservoir nesting along the Connecticut River Valley, at the Wachusett Reservoir and as far east as the Merrimac River. In 2007, the Bald Eagle population had recovered enough nationwide that they were removed from the Federal Endangered Species List.



Eagle chicks at about 6 weeks
Photo by Bill Byrne, Mass Wildlife

The Big News!

In 2017, MASSWildlife held their annual nesting survey and identified 68 territorial pairs in Massachusetts. This is the highest number recorded since the Bald Eagles were reintroduced to Massachusetts. Quabbin Reservoir had eight nests and eleven chicks in 2017.

Tips for viewing Bald Eagles at Quabbin

Although Bald Eagles are becoming more widespread in Massachusetts Quabbin Reservoir is still one of the more reliable places to view them.

Start early...morning is the best time to see the eagles.

Dress appropriately for the weather and bring binoculars or a spotting scope.

Choose windy days, the eagles will use the updrafts to soar in search of food. In Quabbin Park, Enfield Lookout, Winsor Dam, Goodnough Dike or Gate 52 in are all good spots for eagle watching.

Bald Eagle Facts

Bald eagles aren't bald; the name comes from the Old English word *balde*, which means *white*.

An eagle's body is about 2.5 feet long (head to tip of tail) and can weigh from 8 to 15 pounds.

Female eagles are larger than males.

Eagles have a wingspan of 6.5 to 7.0 feet wide.

An eagle's nest is made of sticks and lined with twigs and green grass and is about the size of a play pen. The heaviest nest ever found was 1 ton (2000 pounds).

An eagle's nest is called an eyrie (air-ree).

A) The Bald eagle prefers to eat:

1. Insects
2. Fish
3. Bird seed
4. Carrion (dead and decaying animal flesh)

B) What bird did Benjamin Franklin want for the US national symbol instead of the eagle?

1. California condor
2. Wild turkey
3. Florida pelican
4. Sage grouse

C) Where are bald eagles found?

1. Worldwide
2. Throughout the Western Hemisphere
3. In North America
4. Only in US states beginning with M

D) The Bald Eagle is on the top of the Federal Endangered species list.

1. True
2. False

Answers: A)2; B) 2; C) 3; D) 2

Bald Eagles are protected under the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act

Identifying Bald Eagles

Because of their remarkable comeback story, bald eagles hold a fascination for many people. As well, because of their size and coloring, adult eagles are easy to identify, even for the novice birder. Their white head and tail and wing span of 6 to 7 feet make them hard to mistake when seen flying or perched high in a tree. Like all birds of prey, the female is slightly larger than the male.

Although fish is their primary food source, eagles are scavengers and will turn to waterfowl and carrion if fish is scarce. Occasionally Quabbin visitors will be treated to the site of an eagle feeding on a white-tailed deer carcass left on the ice by another predator.



Juvenile Bald Eagle
Photo by Michael Phillips

Immature eagles are harder to identify than adults, because they do not have the distinctive bald head until approximately 5 years of age. A close observer will notice that immature birds also lack the yellow beak and eyes of the adult bald eagle.

Immature eagles are sometimes mistaken for Golden Eagles. Distinguished from immature Balds by the golden feathers on their heads and hindneck, Golden Eagles are a rare visitor to Quabbin.



Golden and bald eagle with deer carcass.
Photo by Dale Monette, DCR

Snow Birds

If a visitor is in the right place at the right time, some of the 15-20 resident Bald Eagles can be seen year round at Quabbin. In the winter, however, that population can rise as high as 50 eagles with the addition of birds from Canada and Northern New England. As cold winter weather settles in their home territory, these northern birds will migrate to Quabbin in search of open water and their main food source, fish.

If the winter remains mild, fewer eagles will need to travel in search of food and Quabbin will see fewer of the birds spending winter here.



Mature Bald Eagles on the ice
Photo by Bill Byrne, MassWildLife