

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

In San Diego County the Bald Eagle is a rare but annual winter visitor to lakes in the foothills and mountains, especially Lake Henshaw. From 1997 to 2002 the number reaching the county varied from about 8 to 15 each year. A few individuals have remained into summer, and in 2001 an unmated bird was carrying sticks, suggesting the Bald Eagle could colonize San Diego County as a breeding species. Reintroduction programs, the banning of eagle shooting, and especially the ban on DDT have resulted in vigorous growth of the Bald Eagle population nationwide since the late 1970s.

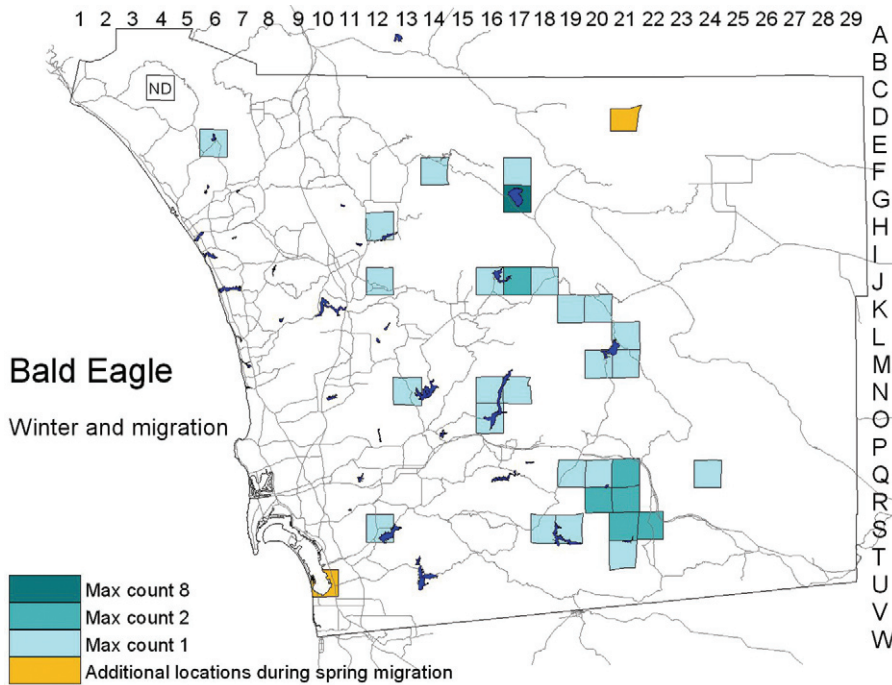
Winter: Because its primary prey is fish, the Bald Eagle occurs mainly at lakes. At Lake Henshaw (G17), the species' favored site in San Diego County, at least two wintered each year from 1997 to 2002, and the maximum count was eight on 26 January 1999 (P. D. Jorgensen). The highest ever was 16 from 13 December 1972 to 28 January 1973 (AB 27:663, 1973). Cuyamaca (M20), Corte Madera (Q20/R20), and Morena (T21/S21/S22) are also fairly consistent sites. Atlas observers noted only one or two at a time away from Lake Henshaw but encountered the species at least occasionally at almost all lakes in the foothills



Photo by Anthony Mercieca

and mountains, even some rather small ones, as in Thing Valley (Q24; one on 7 January 2001, J. R. Barth).

On lakes in the coastal lowland the Bald Eagle is infrequent, with only two noted during the atlas period (O'Neill Lake, E6, 1 December 2000–14 January 2001, P. A. Ginsburg; Sweetwater Reservoir, S12, 30 December 2000, C. H. Reiser). It is even less frequent in coastal wetlands; 10 years of monthly surveys of San Elijo Lagoon (L7) yielded only one (King et al. 1987). From 1980 to 2002, the San Diego and Rancho Santa Fe Christmas bird



Bald Eagle

Winter and migration

counts recorded the Bald Eagle only once, the Oceanside count not at all. In the Anza-Borrego Desert the only records are of one over Whale Peak (L25) 18 February 1983 (A. G. Morley) and one over Indianhead (F23) 14 January 1997 (D. Waber).

Migration: Bald Eagles begin arriving in San Diego County in October, recorded as early as the 3rd (1978, Sweetwater Reservoir, D. Thompson) and the 4th (1982, Lake Henshaw, R. Higson, AB 37:223, 1983). Most depart in March; the latest date recorded for a migrant is 4 May (1984, immature at Lake Henshaw, R. Higson, AB 38:960, 1984). An immature at the Sweetwater River mouth on San Diego Bay (U10) 16 and 25 April 1998 (B. C. Moore) and an adult in Lost Valley (D21) 28 April 2000 (W. E. Haas) were unusual for both date and location.

The Bald Eagle has been reintroduced to the Channel Islands, and a tagged subadult released at Santa Catalina Island showed up at Lake Morena 24 July 2001 (R. Roedell).

Breeding distribution: The only known nesting of the Bald Eagle in San Diego County was in 1936, when A. O. Treganza collected an egg from Little Tecate Peak (V17) 8 March (WFVZ 55005). No summering birds were reported until 1988, when one was near Julian 18 May (J. Smith, AB 42:481, 1988) and 1996, when one was near the sum-

mit of Hot Springs Mountain (E20) 15 June (G. L. Rogers, NASFN 50:996, 1996). In 2000 an adult was at Lake Henshaw 18 June (P. Unitt) and another was at Lake Cuyamaca 20–23 June (D. Bittner, NAB 54:423, 2000). Then on 21 March 2001 an adult was carrying sticks to a sycamore tree at Lake Henshaw (W. E. Haas). Evidently lacking a mate, this bird got no farther with its attempt to nest and did not remain through the summer. But the episode suggests that the Bald Eagle could soon colonize San Diego County as a breeding species. Its nearest current nest site is at Lake Hemet, Riverside County, where two young fledged in 2003 (D. Bittner).

Nesting: Bald Eagles build an enormous stick nest, usually in a tall tree. They also nest on cliffs where trees are few or none; the nest on Little Tecate Peak was on a “pinnacle of rock.”

Conservation: The Bald Eagle suffered greatly from shooting and from poisoning by DDT and lead. It was among the first species formally listed as endangered by the federal government in 1967. With these adverse factors largely controlled, however, since 1980 the population has climbed steeply (Buehler 2000). In San Diego County, which is peripheral to the species’ range, the most noticeable change is the occurrences in summer. Lake Henshaw Christmas bird counts, begun in January 1981, show no strong trend. But a change may be more likely detected in the number of lakes with Bald Eagles than in the number on a single lake.

Taxonomy: The Bald Eagle is usually divided into a larger northern subspecies, *H. l. alascanus* Townsend, 1897, and a smaller southern one, *H. l. leucocephalus* (Linnaeus, 1766). Birds nesting in San Diego County would be the smaller subspecies, but winter visitors are more likely the northern one, and measurements of the single specimen, from Lake Cuyamaca 20 December 1922 (MVZ 144728), identify it as *alascanus* (Unitt 1984). A Bald Eagle fitted with a radio transmitter and wintering at Lake Henshaw in 1999 and 2000 had migrated from Great Slave Lake, northern Canada (D. Bittner, B. J. Walton).