

Bald eagle

Status

Federal status: G4 N4, Threatened

NH state status: S1, Endangered

ME state status: S4, Threatened

Bald eagle populations have fluctuated dramatically over the last two centuries. Prior to European settlement of North America, the species was abundant and common across its range, especially in areas with a great deal of aquatic habitat. Persecution by humans and the introduction of pesticides led to sharp decreases in eagle populations, and the species became rare in the contiguous U.S. in the mid- to late-1900s. Subsequent protection of the eagle over part or all of its range, along with restrictions placed on pesticide use, resulted in population increases. The species' recovery became apparent in the 1980s, and by the late 1990s bald eagles had re-established breeding populations in all Canadian provinces, all the contiguous U.S. states except for VT and RI, and to a limited extent, in Mexico. Eagle populations have reached recovery goals over most of the lower 48 states, but are still lower than pre-European settlement levels

Outcome A is given for eagle populations both range-wide and locally, for both current and future conditions. Range-wide, eagle populations have increased to or beyond historic conditions in many places. Neither Forest has breeding so local outcome was for VT and NH, not individual Forests.

Distribution

Breeds in central Alaska and the Yukon, across Canada to Labrador and Newfoundland, south locally to the Aleutian Islands, central Arizona, central New Mexico, Baja California, and the Gulf Coast. Locally distributed in the interior of North America. In New England, the bald eagle breeds throughout Maine, west to New Hampshire, south to western Massachusetts and northern Connecticut. It does not nest in Vermont or Rhode Island.

Historically in NH, records identify Umbagog, Squam, and Newfound Lakes, Lake Wentworth in Wolfeboro, the Connecticut Lakes in Pittsburg, Great Bay and Hampton Harbor as summer habitat; the last young produced were in 1949 at Umbagog Lake. In NH, eagle activity increased during the 1980's to include a substantial wintering population, consistent summer activity in 2 locations and in 1989, nesting at Umbagog Lake in Errol. In 2000 in NH, there were 4 nesting pairs at Umbagog Lake, Nelson, Hinsdale (island on the CT River), and Pontook Reservoir but no young were produced. In 2000, there was an estimate of 34 eagles present in NH in the summer, with 50-60 wintering individuals estimated.

More than 240 geographically distinct breeding areas have been documented in ME. Annual inventories suggest substantial population growth. Bald eagles nesting and production surveys for Maine in 2001 showed 263 young fledged from 174 successful nests.

Bald eagles currently do not nest or roost on the WMNF, but may forage there and are occasionally seen flying over during summer months and migration periods.

Habitat

Bald eagles generally nest in large trees adjacent to fish-bearing water bodies. Most pairs reuse the same nest for many years. In New England, they usually select large, live, supercanopy white pines near moderate to large-sized ponds, lakes, and rivers.

Bald eagles winter in coastal regions throughout New England, and inland if open water is available, such as along the Connecticut River and Merrimack Rivers. Bald eagles tend to avoid human disturbance where possible.

Limiting Factors

Killing by humans and pesticides caused dramatic historic declines in bald eagle populations. Although these threats are still concerns, the most important limiting factor for current bald eagle populations is loss of shoreline habitat to human development. Other threats to eagles include human disturbance during the nesting season, loss of prey base due to overfishing, acid rain, changes in waterways, environmental contaminants, and collisions with vehicles or structures. Low rates of reproduction, due to a variety of factors, have been the most significant obstacle to eagle recovery in Maine, though rates have recently increased to “normal” levels.

Viability concern

Federally listed species that probably forages on WMNF, so Forest is required to address potential impacts from projects and Forest Plan revision. Not known or likely to nest on the WMNF, so viability not considered a concern on the Forest.

Management activities that might affect populations or viability

Recreational development along large rivers and lakes with abundant fish populations, and increased use of motorboats and personal watercraft on these waterbodies, could reduce habitat suitability. However some bald eagles can adapt readily to human presence, so the potential for impact probably depends on current use in the area.

Management that would substantially alter fish populations in large rivers and lakes on or off the WMNF could affect foraging and nesting habitat suitability.

References

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