

Nature Notes

...from Sharon

Bald Eagle

(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*)

The dramatic recovery of the Bald Eagle over the past 40 years represents one of the great conservation success stories in our nation's history. We are indeed fortunate to have Bald Eagles frequent and breed in the area and throughout Florida's coasts, rivers, lakes and marshes. They only live in North America and are in every state except Hawaii (where it has never lived). It is the largest raptor in North America, up to 38 inches in length and a wingspan up to 96 inches—8 feet! The scientific name signifies a sea (*halo*) eagle (*aetos*) with a white (*leukos*) head. "Balde" is an old English word that at one time meant "white head," not smooth head. The sexes are indistinguishable by plumage, but females are larger than males. Adults are dark brown with a white head and tail. The eyes, bill, legs, and feet are yellow. Juveniles are chocolate brown all over, with dark brown eyes and grayish-black bill, until they are four years old. Then they begin to get adult colors, with full adult plumage attained about the fifth year.



Bald Eagle in Osprey nest
at Barefoot Beach Preserve

In 2008, the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission (FWC) removed the Bald Eagle from the state list of threatened species—after it was removed from the **federal** list of endangered species in 2007. There is still a state rule for eagle protection (F.A.C. 68A-16.002). FWC has also released a state *Bald Eagle Management Plan* that outlines recommendations to help avoid violating state and federal laws. As part of its management plan, the documented nesting population of Bald Eagles in Florida will be monitored by FWC until at least 2032, to obtain information needed to determine if the population continues to stabilize or change over time. FWC has a website (<http://myfwc.com/eagle/eaglenests/nestlocator.aspx#search>) where you can locate eagle nests. It shows there are 6 nests within 5 miles of Barefoot Beach Preserve and 68 nests within a 25 mile radius. No wonder we see them around the Preserve at times. In August 2009, we had one visit the Osprey nest near the Learning Center—before the Ospreys returned for the season. Again recently, another one was spotted near the same nest. The current nesting population of the Bald Eagle in the lower 48 states is 9,789 pairs. Of this, over 1,000 nesting pairs are in Florida. If you think you have discovered a new nest, use the eagle nest locator to make sure it is an undocumented nest and then contact FWC to report a potentially new nest.

Preferred nest sites are the tops of tall living trees near the edges of eagle habitats—a tree that offers a view of the surrounding area and can support the eagle's often sizeable nest. The Bald Eagle builds the largest nest of any North American bird—up to 8 feet wide, 13 feet deep, and it may weigh one ton. Once paired, Bald Eagles remain together for life; although, if one dies, the survivor may accept a new mate. In Florida, they begin re-building a nest or start gathering materials for a new nest in late September or early October. They usually return to the same nest used in prior years. Nearly all nests in Florida are less than two miles from water. Most clutches of eggs in Florida are laid between December and early January, averaging two eggs. Incubation lasts about 35 days. Nestlings in Florida fledge at around 11 weeks of age and remain with their parents near the nest for an additional 4–11 weeks. Fledglings begin to fly regularly in the vicinity before initial dispersal, which occurs from April to July. Did you know: Bald Eagles are active during daylight hours (diurnal); adults can get up to 14 pounds and have 7,000 feathers; they can fly 30 mph at heights of 10,000 feet; their beak, talons, and feathers are made of keratin, like finger nails; average wild lifespan is 15-20 years; and wild record lifespan is 28 years. They are opportunistic foragers, feeding or scavenging on a wide variety of prey, including catching various fish (80%), small mammals, reptiles, and birds. Being able to see over a mile away certainly helps spot prey! Most prey is captured from the surface of the water, but Bald Eagles often harass Ospreys in flight to relinquish fish that they have captured.