

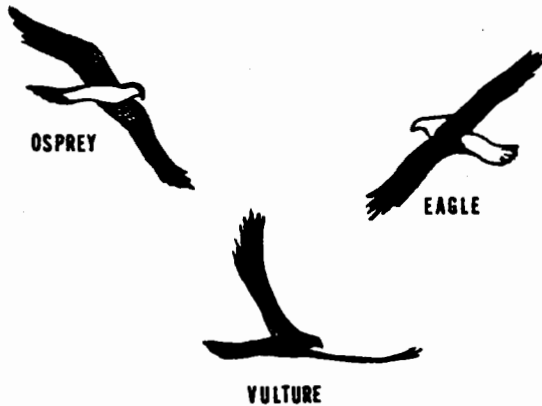
7/13/84



Natural History Notes

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The Bald Eagle II



The bald eagle, our national symbol, is the second largest bird in the United States. The California condor is the largest. A mature bald eagle has a wing spread of six to eight feet and weighs from 12 to 14 pounds. Its total body length from bill to end of tail feathers is usually about three feet. The golden eagle, which inhabits mountains and prairies country, is about the same size as the bald eagle but its entire body is dark brown all its life. In contrast, the mature bald eagle's upper neck, head and tail is covered with snow white feathers. The term "bald" does not refer to a bareheaded condition, but dates back several hundred years when it meant white.

After hatching in early May eaglets grow rapidly and are about the same dimensions as their parents when they leave the nest in late July or early August. The chicks are covered with a silky down when they hatch but within about three weeks the down is replaced by dark-brown feathers with flecks of white. They retain this basic dark-brown plumage until their third summer when streaks of white begin to appear on their heads and tails. By the fifth summer the bald eagle's head and tail feathers are snow white, giving it an easily recognizable appearance. The all-brown immature bald eagle is sometimes confused with two other northern Wisconsin birds, the osprey and the turkey vulture. Here are some distinguishing characteristics. The eagle has a large head and broad, straight, flat wings. The osprey's wings have a bend or crook in them when soaring. The osprey's

underside is a somewhat mottled grey-white in color. Turkey vultures are often seen soaring around the same area in groups of four or more. They are all black and smaller than eagles. Additionally, while soaring, the turkey vulture's wings are not flat but appear like a broad V with spaces between the tips of the primary flight feathers.

The cliché "eagle eye" is well-founded for this bird truly has remarkable vision, eight times better than man and, perhaps, the best of any animal. It can see a rabbit in a meadow from a mile away or spot a fish near the water's surface from several hundred feet. Apparently the bald eagle has a very poor sense of smell but it does have good hearing. It can hear high-pitched sounds well above man's threshold of hearing.

The bald eagle's talons or claws are about two inches long and are the primary tools used in capturing prey. When the eagle grasps a fish or other animal with its very strong feet the talons are thrust into the prey, usually killing it quickly. After carrying the prey off to a feeding place the eagle uses its talons to hold it, while it tears the meat into bite-size chunks with its sharply curved beak. Being very versatile fliers, eagles can soar slowly or dive at more than 100 mph, or hover over one spot for short periods of time. These birds probably don't fly for the fun of it. They fly primarily in search of food or to avoid danger. Much of their time is spent perched near their nesting area or a favored spot.

Bald eagles are closely associated with water and most often nest close to large lakes or the ocean. This is no coincidence, since fish are their primary food. In fact, the eagle is somewhat of a scavenger, often taking dead or injured fish. They can't swim, nor can they dive into the water for fish like the osprey can. The eagle is an opportunist and will often let the osprey do the fishing. After the osprey dives for a fish, the eagle will chase the osprey, forcing it to drop the fish. The eagle will catch the fish in mid-air or pick it up off the ground or water. Easy-to-catch wounded waterfowl are also a favorite in the eagle's diet and it is often seen eating road-killed mammals such as deer and rabbits. However, fish are its favorite, and the maintenance of well-balanced fish populations is important to the bald eagle's survival. It is imperative that we share natural resources with all animals who depend on them.