

NATURALISTS' NOTES

Life in the Aerie

A bald eagle's (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) life cycle begins in early spring with courtship involving aerial displays—cartwheels, huge swoops, and chases. Copulation requires a secure perch and is preceded by tail pumping and wing flapping by the male. Usually an eagle pair nests near water in the tallest tree, defending their territory against other eagles. The nest or aerie grows each year with the addition of new materials. In Powell River, eagle nests can be viewed in high trees along the sea walk.

Eggs, usually two, are laid during April or May. An adult is on the nest almost the entire 35 days until the downy eaglets hatch. Usually, it is the female that broods the young the first weeks while the male brings food to the nest.

After a month, feeding is a full time job for both parents. Eaglets have enormous appetites, with the largest always eating first. Their birth weight of 3 ounces increases to 10 pounds in about six weeks. As they grow, eaglets become more aggressive toward their parents and each other. The smallest of the eaglets may be killed by the largest. Less than half of the eagles hatched reach adulthood.

Fledging, or first flight, takes place about 4 months after the eggs are laid. At fledging, eaglets appear to be larger than their parents because of their flight feathers. These longer feathers help stabilize the juveniles during their early flying days. By the end of summer, the juveniles leave the nest to be on their own.

Juvenile bald eagles show a mixture of brown and white feathers and a black bill. The distinctive adult plumage develops with sexual maturity, at 4 or 5 years of age. Eagles generally form pairs at maturity and remain together until one dies. Eagles may live as long as 30 years but the average lifespan is 15 to 20 years. This relatively long life compensates for the high death rate among eaglets.

Bald eagles are only found in North America and are listed as endangered or threatened in many jurisdictions. The introduction of DDT into the food chain in the 1940s led to high levels of the pesticide in eagles and resulting fragile eggshells. Populations have increased more than ten times since DDT was banned in 1970. Now, the majority of reported bald eagle deaths are due to hunting and electrocution. BC Hydro is trying to reduce eagle mortality with structural changes to utility poles and lines. Eagles are further protected by provincial regulations that prohibit removal of eagle nest trees.

Bald eagles are ecologically significant, as they are predators that regulate other bird populations. BC's ecotourism industry benefits from eagles, as evidenced by eagle festivals throughout the province. For everyone, to watch an eagle soar is to watch a “thing of beauty and a joy forever”.

Written by Sharon Thomas for the Malaspina Naturalists Club. Photo by Paul Clements. For more information on local fauna contact the Malaspina Naturalists at 604.485.6134.