

Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area



Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos*)

Description/Size

Wing span: 72-85 inches

Length: 30-40 inches

Weight: 7-13 pounds

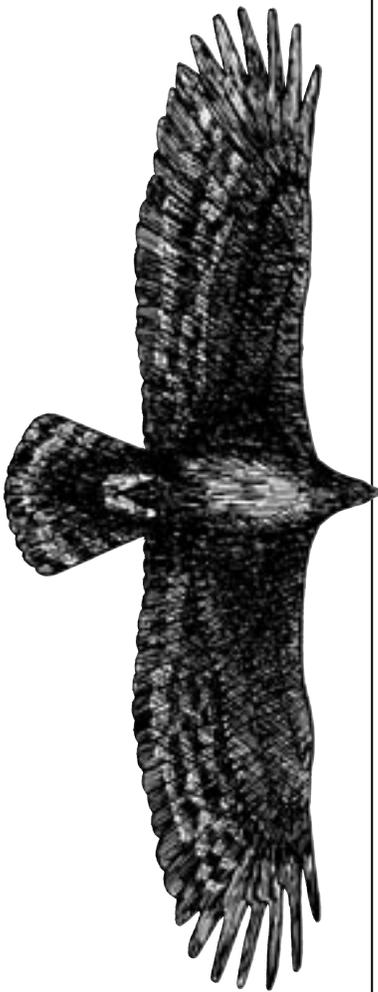
Dark brown with a golden or light brown nape and dark eyes and beak. Legs are feathered to toes. Adult plumage is attained by four to five years of age. Plumages of both sexes are similar. Immature birds usually lack the golden feathers, and have white patches near the base of the tail and sometimes on the wings. Females are larger than males but there is overlap in some measurements.

Similar Species

Bald Eagle - First year bald eagles resemble adult golden eagles, but lack the golden nape and have a larger dark beak and unfeathered legs.

Habitat/Range

Found throughout the Northern Hemisphere, including North America, Europe, Asia, and northern Africa. In North America the majority are found west of Texas. They are occasionally seen in the Adirondacks and southern Appalachians. Prefers the open terrain of deserts, mountains, plateaus and steppes cut by canyons, gullies or outcrops. They favor habitats where upwind drafts help them takeoff and soar.



Food/Diet

An opportunistic predator that preys on small to medium sized mammals such as ground squirrels, jackrabbits, marmots and other rodents. Also eats birds, reptiles, fish and carrion. Most prey is captured on the ground, but birds are also caught in the air. Pairs sometimes hunt cooperatively. While golden eagles can kill large prey, they can typically only carry about 2-3 pounds.

Voice

Vocalizations are limited to courtship, territory defense and communication with young. Are generalized as screams, or yelps.

Behavior

Golden eagles soar with their wings in a slight "V" shape. They fly with slow, powerful wing beats and usually glide briefly after flapping 6 to 8 times. Northern populations of this species tend to migrate south for the winter.

Reproduction/Nesting

Clutch size: 2
Eggs: white, lightly blotched with cinnamon
Incubation: 43 to 45 days
Fledge: 9-11 weeks
Disperse: 11 weeks

Nest in open or semi-open habitats; nests built on cliffs, in trees, or on man-made structures. Most nests are close to hunting areas with a good view of the surrounding area. Nests are constructed mainly of large dry sticks; size varies but initially 3 feet in diameter; height also increases over the years. Pairs commonly maintain alternate nests within their territory. Are believed to mate for life. Golden eagles are very sensitive to human disturbance during nesting. Breeding success is also very dependent on prey densities. Due to high mortality rates it takes a pair 10 years to produce enough young to replace themselves.



Life Span

Longest recorded – 23 years 10 months. In captivity may live as long as 48 years.

Conservation Status

The golden eagle is not on the US Fish and Wildlife's Endangered or Threatened Species List. However it is protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald Eagle Act. Idaho Fish & Game lists the golden eagle as a protected non game species for which it is illegal to collect, harm or otherwise remove from its natural habitat. Golden eagles are considered to be fairly common in the western US, Canada and Alaska. They have few natural enemies and people, indirectly and directly, remain the greatest source of mortality: electrocution, collisions with vehicles, power lines, wind turbines, poisoning and illegal shooting. Human disturbance around nests can lead to nest abandonment. Habitat change due to urbanization, agricultural development, and wildfire decreases available habitat and reduces prey populations.

Viewing in the NCA

Golden eagles can be seen in the NCA year-round. Approximately 30 pairs nest in the NCA along cliff faces in the Snake River Canyon or on large transmission towers. Golden eagles may also be seen perched on telephone poles surveying for prey.

Interesting Facts

Spanish name:
Aquila real

- The scientific name comes from the Latin word *aquila* meaning eagle; *chrysaetos* is Greek for golden eagle which is obtained from the combination of *khrysos* for golden and *aetos* for eagle.
- Other names: Black Eagle, War Eagle, Royal Eagle, bird of Jupiter, king of birds, and American war bird.
- The golden eagle occupies a prominent place in the legends and culture of many peoples.
- Golden eagles can dive at speeds well over 150 mph and possess the strongest grip of any raptor in the NCA. An eagle's talons can close with 1200 pounds per square inch of pressure; the human jaw can close with just 600.
- Golden eagles captured in the NCA during the winter have been fitted with radio transmitters and tracked to their nesting grounds in Southeastern and Central Alaska.

Sources

AXIA CD ROM - Know Your Birds of Prey
Bird Banding Lab - www.pwrc.usgs.gov/bbl/homepage/long2890.htm
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Hogle Zoo - www.hoglezoo.org/animals/view.php?id=86
Hawk Mt Sanctuary - www.hawkmountain.org/education/images/Golden%20Eagle.pdf
Idaho Fish&Game - <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov/wildlife/nongame/birdspecies.cfm>
National Audubon Society The Sibley Guide to Birds
The Peregrine Fund - www.peregrinefund.org
website - www.snowspine.com/beastary/falcons.html
website - www.nps.gov/jeff/Gazettes/Eagle.htm
University of Minnesota, Raptor Center - www.raptor/cvm/umn.edu
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service - <http://migratorybirds.fws.gov/intrnltr/mbta/mbtandx.html#h>

Illustration: courtesy Alberta Sustainable Resource Development
Map: The Peregrine Fund
Photography: David Ellis