

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

Bald Eagle

POST #60—February 16, 2023

February is an interesting month. In most years, snow depth is approaching its maximum for the season, which makes hunting difficult for many species overwintering in the region. Towards the end of the month, spring migration begins with the first eagles and Rough-legged hawks starting their long migrations further north. One of earliest migrants returning to our area at the end of February is our featured species today: Bald Eagle!

It might be a surprise to hear that Bald Eagles are one of the earliest migrants back to our area, but they are a great indicator of the changing of seasons. In fact, in locations to the south of us in Minnesota, nesting has already begun for this species! There are few nesting pairs of Bald Eagles in the Sax-Zim Bog, but so far no pair has returned to their nesting locations. However, there has been some local movement of Bald Eagles lately in our area, so it is only a matter of time before they start courtship!

Bald Eagle courtship is perhaps not as exciting or elaborate as some bird species, but it is critical to the nesting success and pair

bonding of this species. Nest maintenance is one of the easiest courtship behaviors to watch and is really important for eagles to maintain pair bonds! Bald Eagle nests are used year after year, but need to be repaired and maintained since they do not use their nests year round. Fitness of a mate can be determined by their ability to continue to find and fly around with sticks. Birds of prey don't utilize fancy songs or plumage like smaller birds, so often breeding readiness is subtle to observe. In the case of Bald Eagles, females facilitate mating by calling their mate and posturing to show readiness.

In our area Bald Eagles do overwinter, but in fairly low numbers. Bodies of water in the Sax-Zim Bog freeze over, so any overwintering Bald Eagles scavenge remnants from wolf kills or road kills. With data collected on our Winter Raptor Surveys, there are a good number of Bald Eagles that use the Sax-Zim Bog during fall and spring migration (November having high numbers of Bald Eagles detected), but few of those birds remain during the winter. By January, Bald Eagles are detected at much lower rates than the fall with less than 1 Bald Eagle/survey. Another really interesting piece of data that we have collected has shown that non-adult Bald Eagles very rarely overwinter in our area and are seldom detected outside of fall migration.

Bald Eagles also have a special relationship with the month of February. One of the many names for the month of February in Ojibwe is Migizi-giizis or the Eagle Moon. The Ojibwe name for Bald Eagle is Migizi and February marks the return of Bald Eagles

to their northern breeding grounds from areas south, thus the name for the month!

More information about this amazing bird can be found in the photos below.

(Photos below by Sparky Stensaas)



This Bald Eagle is well adapted for winter conditions, as long as it has access to food. While this species is a skilled fish predator, they do scavenge regularly, as well as capture non-fish prey!



Bald Eagles take at least 4 years to get their adult plumage. This adult is at least 5 years old, but could be older! Bald Eagles in the wild can live into their mid-30's!



Hatch year Bald Eagles often get confused with Golden Eagles!
This is a young Bald Eagle: note the large, primarily dark colored
bill, white wing linings and armpits, and lack of brightly colored
nape.



This is a really great photo showing multiple age classes of Bald Eagles! Can you age these birds?



When driving, be conscious of birds at roadkill sites. Bald Eagles are quite heavy and cannot fly at an appropriate height after they spook from a carcass, leading to car collisions. Just remember to talk a few seconds to slow down when you spot bird activity along the side of the road.