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Bald Eagles Make Comeback in South Louisiana

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In the early 1900s, bald eagles were common throughout southern Louisiana, but the deleterious effects of DDT on the birds and their eggshells had placed the species on the endangered list by the 1970s. In 1972, only six or seven nesting territories remained in South Louisiana.

Thirty years later, the bald eagle is no longer even on the threatened species list (where it was placed in 1985). It is, however, still protected by state and federal laws. Today, possession of a bald eagle, alive or dead, merits a fine of from \$500 to \$20,000 with jail terms of up to two years. Possession of feathers is a crime, also.

The comeback is credited in large part to law enforcement and decreased use of DDT. The Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries began aerial surveys to monitor nesting birds in 1984 (Figure 1). By 1985, the number of active nests had increased to 18. Today about 150 active nests exist. Most are between the Mississippi River and Vermilion Bay, with Terrebonne Parish topping the list with 54 known nesting sites (Figure 2).

South Louisiana's marshes are attractive to the fish-eating bald eagles, not only because of abundant food, but also because of the prevalence of large cypress trees. Because the eagles add to their large nests each year, nests can reach weights of several hundred pounds and diameters of 10 to 12 feet.

The eagles nest in South Louisiana during the winter, when pair activities include readying the nest and laying eggs. Most egg laying is completed in late November, and the eggs hatch around year's end. By March, most young have left the nest and soon thereafter most of the eagles will leave the state. October signals the population's return to the state. Scientists think the birds spend the summer in northern states.

A 1,500-foot radius around each nest protects the birds from human activities between October 15 and May 15. Anyone who anticipates being within 1,500 feet of a bald eagle nest during this period must contact the Department of Wildlife and Fisheries or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.



The male blue-winged teal migrates through Louisiana in September through October and again February through April. It winters in Colombia and Venezuela.

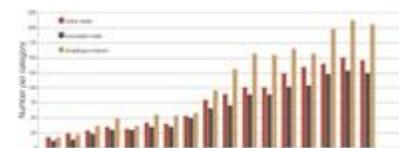


Figure 1. The bald eagle was placed on the threatened species list in 1985. Since then, a concerted effort has been made to bring back the numbers.

Scientists believe the birds will expand their range into parts of the Atchafalaya Basin and marginal habitats along the coast. As the bald eagle population grows and more young birds mature into breeding age, either they will have to wait for territories to become available as aged birds die or they will have to establish new nesting territories. In the meantime, Louisiana is an integral part of the recovery of this important species.

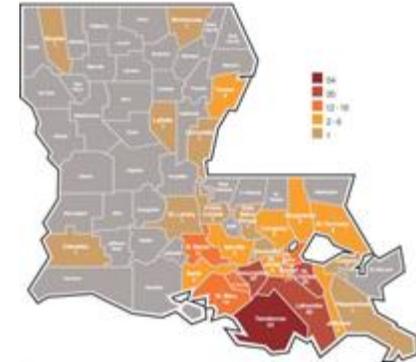


Figure 2. Bald eagle nests are found in many parishes but most are concentrated in the south central part of the state near the coast.



An adult bald eagle watches chicks in the nest in the top of a large cypress tree.