

Get Wild: Beautiful bald eagles

Karn Stiegelmeier



A nesting pair of bald eagles is pictured in Summit County.

Richard Seeley/Courtesy photo

During blizzard-like, windy weather — with little in the way of views — I looked out and watched in awe as a Bald Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, flew over the Blue River! While everyone is sharing their struggles — getting on enough layers, driving in whiteouts, and deciding to ski or hide away — the eagle is just doing the usual, looking for fish along the river, like it was any other day. *Haliaeetus* means fish eagle, and there are seven different species of fish eagles around the world. The species name *leucocephalus* means white head.

It seems like almost yesterday that eagles were so rare. According to Colorado Parks and Wildlife, there were fewer than 10 nesting pairs across the state in the 1970s. Today, there are over 200 nesting pairs in Colorado. They were noted in Summit significantly starting in 2010 to present. Before that time, we had a few nesting ospreys — also known as the sea hawk — and then both species began successfully reproducing and have been commonly seen in recent years.

Growing up in the Front Range, I never saw bald eagles. Now, from my brother's house looking north in Golden, we see them regularly. We are fortunate to get to watch these fabulous creatures, our national symbol established in 1782. There were over 100,000 nesting eagles, according to anecdotal accounts from that time.

Shortly after World War II, the insecticide DDT was developed to control mosquitoes and other insects. Bald eagles were among many birds poisoned by DDT when they ate contaminated fish and other foods. The chemical interferes with the birds' abilities to produce a strong eggshell, and they were unable to successfully reproduce. By 1963, there were only 417 known nesting pairs of bald eagles in the U.S. This species and many others were in danger of extinction.

Finally, in 1972, the dangers of DDT were becoming understood. Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring" brought awareness and horror to the mainstream.

The recovery of bald eagles and many other birds, including ospreys, resulted from these actions: Banning DDT and certain other pesticides and adopting the Endangered Species Act. In 1995, bald eagles were moved from the endangered category to threatened, and in 2007, they were delisted under the Endangered Species Act but remain protected under the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act, preventing the killing, selling or harming of eagles, their nests or eggs.

Here in Summit, we are fortunate to have bald eagles, golden eagles, and ospreys. Ospreys and bald eagles have similar nesting and fishing locations. Both are seen in Summit successfully carrying their fish catch, especially in summer months, and both are known for stealing the catch from each other: a mid-air drama! Ospreys are smaller and have some quick maneuverability advantage, whereas eagles have the advantage of large size and speed. Both have mated pairs returning back to the

same nest site year after year. Both are known for mating for life — 10-25 years — and for coming back to the same nesting site each spring.

Guide books show that bald eagles are not in most of Northern America during our cold winter months, but return in the spring. However, we have a funny anomaly in the middle of Colorado where some eagles remain all winter long. Perhaps they like to watch the skiers or the cars stuck on Interstate 70, and they certainly thrive on the fish that survive in our Blue River and in the warm waters of the wastewater treatment plants. There is always something fun to watch in the Summit winter!

Karn Stiegelmeier is the immediate past Chair of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information,

visit EagleSummitWilderness.org .