



Bald Eagle Identification Tips



Joe Kosack/PGC Photo

Most Americans can identify an adult bald eagle at close range without difficulty. The striking white head, neck and tail are unmistakable field marks. At a distance, however, or silhouetted against a clouded sky, bald eagles may be more challenging to positively identify. Immature eagles, like the one above, lack the definitive color pattern of adults. Still they carry telltale traits that help positively identify them.

Bald eagle traits to look for:

Perching Bald Eagle

Bald eagles perch and roost in an upright square-shouldered stance grasping a branch with strong, yellow talons. They are 28 to 38 inches tall. Females are larger than males. The bald eagle's beak is large and heavily curved. The color of this hooked beak ranges from bright orange-yellow in adults to dark gray in first year birds. Use the [Age Identification Chart](#) if you need guidance. The bald eagle's upper legs are feathered, but its lower legs are bare to the talons.

On the Wing

Bald eagles soar on broad wings held in a flat plane. Their wingspan ranges from five and a half to eight feet. In flight, the bald eagle pumps its wings in slow, powerful wing beats. The front or leading edge of the wings runs fairly straight across, especially when viewed from a distance. The bald eagle's head is prominent and when compared visually to its tail, it extends forward more than half the length of its long, wedge-shaped tail. Immature bald eagles have white showing in the wing pit area, unlike golden eagles.

Comparing other large raptors

Golden Eagle



Hal Korber/PGC Photo

Golden eagles are sometimes confused with immature bald eagles, especially first-year bald eagles. Golden eagles, however, have no white markings in their wing pit area, unlike immature bald eagles. When soaring, golden eagles hold their wings slightly raised above the horizontal plane. The front or leading edge of the golden eagle's wings is curved. The trailing edge has deeper curves as compared to the bald eagle as well. The golden

eagle's head is not as prominent as in the profile of a bald eagle. It protrudes in front of the wings less than half the length of its tail. The golden eagle is well-named and its golden hackles can be seen in good light. The golden eagle's legs are fully feathered down to the tarsus, but it has yellow feet like the bald eagle.



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

Osprey

Ospreys are generally smaller than bald eagles, 21 to 26 inches in length with a wingspan of four and a half feet to six feet. The osprey soars with a distinct crook in its wings. Its profile is more like a gull's than an eagle's. From a distance, its wings appear to cup downward. The underside of an osprey's body and its head are white and a dark cheek line extends across its eye. Dark wrist marks show when flying.

Turkey Vulture

In flight, the turkey vultures hold their wings in a sharp V-shape called a dihedral. This large bird rocks back and forth on large wings in an unstable flight. Turkey vultures have a rather small head compared to a bald eagle.



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

Black Vulture

Black vultures hold their wings in a slight dihedral, similar to golden eagles. Their head and neck appear small and its tail very short. When soaring, black vultures show distinct white wing patches on their wingtips.



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

Red-tailed Hawk

Red-tailed hawks are smaller than bald eagles with a four- to five-foot wingspan. This buteo is 18 to 25 inches long, about twice the size of a crow. The typical eastern red-tailed hawk has a white throat, a darker belly band, and a light red tail.

Rough-legged Hawk

Rough-legged hawks are considerably smaller than bald eagles with only a four- to four-and-a-half-foot wingspan. They have small beaks and feet for a raptor of their size. This large winter buteo is very lanky in appearance and comes in either a light or dark morph (plumage). An open field raptor, it characteristically flies in a dihedral and hovers over its small mammal prey. It frequently perches in the open on small branches on top of trees and shrubs. Light morphs have contrasting dark carpal patch.