

The Bald Eagle's Unparalleled Return

It began 30 years ago. Today, it's the stuff of legend.



By Joe Kosack
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IN 1983, when the Pennsylvania Game Commission's bald eagle reintroduction started, there probably wasn't more than a handful of people who thought these symbolic birds had a chance to repopulate our Commonwealth. Eagles, which had suffered for centuries from persecution, were barely hanging on in Pennsylvania. What remained—three nesting pairs—was an abysmal token of what was. Their population collapse from the close of World War II through the 1960s was caused primarily by the environmental consequences of water pollution and secondary poisoning through bioaccumulation of pesticides and other chemicals. They really were washed up in Pennsylvania.

But eventually the tide turned in America's war against pollution and efforts to prohibit substances that

disrupted ecosystems and poisoned wildlife. PCBs and organochlorine pesticides such as DDT were banned. Sewage, acid mine drainage and agricultural runoff weren't finding their way into waterways as easily, thanks to 1977's Clean Water Act. Dumps were ordered closed; landfills—and their leachate—were managed better. Discussion also had started to ban using lead shot for waterfowl hunting; eagles routinely scavenge unrecovered waterfowl. Our environmental reform over the last quarter of the twentieth century paved the way for Pennsylvania's landscape to become more eagle friendly. And, with each passing decade, eagles responded to our improving ecological health.

But in the early 1980s, Pennsylvania was only three pairs of nesting bald eagles strong. They all were

in Crawford County's Pymatuning-Conneaut Marsh region. The rest of the state, which once harbored nesting eagles along the Delaware, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, Juniata, Allegheny and Ohio rivers, and in the Poconos pothole country, was without nesters. Gone with them were nesting ospreys and peregrines. It was a difficult time for wildlife managers; corrective legislation was in place and healing had started, but there wasn't a nearby population from which to draw new nesters. Pennsylvania—in fact the whole Northeast—needed young eagles to establish territories. Getting them was the problem.

Part of this recruitment quandary stemmed from the bald eagle's low numbers. But it also was being impacted by, of all things, the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940, which stipulated only bald eagles from the United States could be released in the United States. Since the Lower 48 had an eagle shortage, it left Alaska as a sole source.

The only promising ways to rebuild the Northeast's population were through translocations, fostering eggs and young, and hacking eaglets. These approaches offered the greatest hope that whatever was raised in a geographic region would eventually nest in there. The key was getting eaglets to fledgling age. Many eagle eggs were lost, because DDT weakened eggshells and parents broke them during incubation. Adding healthy eggs to thinsheled clutches, or hatched young to nests offered hope. So, too, did hacking, translocating eaglets from other areas to elevated enclosures, where they are raised with minimal human contact and allowed to fledge into the wild when they come of age.

Maine took the first stab at bolstering the Northeast's eagles through egg transplants in 1974. Two years later, New York tried hacking with eaglets from Alaska. But the Last Frontier had its limitations; it couldn't supply chicks for a Northeast reintroduction. However, a 1982 exchange of gifts between Germany and the White House, interestingly, was about to create an unprecedented opportunity for America's bald eagles.

Former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt wanted to give President Ronald Reagan two captive bald eagles from Germany to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the bald eagle's adoption by Congress as our national emblem. But the Bald Eagle Protection Act stood in the gift's way, because the birds were from Germany, not the United States. A Department of Interior lawyer soon was asked to assess whether the act was being interpreted properly. He soon concluded—surprise—the 40-year-old law was being misinterpreted: it prohibited the importation of eagles by only individuals, not governments. So, Schmidt got to give his eagles to President Reagan. But the seemingly inconsequential decision that paved the way for the gift-giving was recognized astutely by others in the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service as clearance to use North America's reservoir of bald eagles in Canada to fuel a bald eagle comeback in the Northeast and elsewhere. Up until that decision, which now is seen by many as a milestone in bald eagle conservation, those birds were off limits.

The feds didn't waste any time getting a plan together: eaglets would be taken from nests in cooperating Canadian provinces and hacked by four

state wildlife conservation agencies from Maine to the Chesapeake Bay. Pennsylvania would receive eagles from Saskatchewan; New Jersey was fed by Manitoba; Massachusetts from Nova Scotia; and New York continued to get eagles from Alaska. In all, more than 300 bald eagles were hacked into the wild to increase both state and regional nesting bald eagle numbers.

The effort immediately began to boost the number of young eagles in the Northeast, and the region's vast areas of unoccupied eagle habitat seemed to help hold them. Reflecting on this grand plan in a 1998 interview, Paul Nickerson, then endangered species chief for the USFWS's Northeast Region Office in Hadley, Mass., said, "The reintroduction enabled us to have eagles reoccupy their former range much quicker than they would have on their own. Maybe several generations quicker! In 1976, there were about 100 pairs of eagles in the Northeast from Maine to the Chesapeake. Today, there are 700 pairs."

Of course, much has happened since Nickerson offered that overview in 1998. For starters, bald eagles no longer are endangered nationally or in Pennsylvania. In fact, they've been delisted nationally and are listed only as threatened today in Pennsylvania. Their recovery has been that dramatic over the past decade, it wouldn't be surprising to see bald eagles delisted in Pennsylvania in the next decade. That's quite a departure from three nests in the early 1980s.

Pennsylvania's participation in the USFWS's multistate eagle recovery began in 1983 when 12 seven-week-old eaglets were taken from nests in the Church River valley of Saskatchewan

by Game Commission employees. The birds were then hacked from specially-constructed towers on Haldeman Island on the Susquehanna River — north of Harrisburg — and Shohola Lake in Pike County. Through 1989, 88 Saskatchewan eaglets were hacked from the two locations. To this day, both sites remain outstanding places to see bald eagles and both have nesting eagles.

The return on the multistate eagle releases wasn't one that could be measured well in the project's early years. Part of the problem was dispersing young eagles go where they will. Some entered other states and vice-versa. Some set up in more remote areas. It wasn't easy to trace their trails. But eventually, it became clear that the eagles were staying in the Northeast and that they were establishing nesting territories.

In 1987, an eagle nest was found in Tioga County's Grand Canyon. It was big news for conservationists, sort of like a new-species-find; the first eagle nest found in eastern Pennsylvania in decades. It was a tremendous gain for bald eagle recolonization. But it would quickly become just another footnote in this bird's remarkable comeback, which was about to really mushroom.

By 1998, Pennsylvania crossed the 25 bald eagle nests threshold. Just three years later, the number of nests doubled in the Commonwealth. In 2006, the state's eagles exceeded 100 nests for the first time in probably more than a century. The PGC lauded the milestone with a commemorative six-inch patch. It was a big deal. But it was short-lived. Two years later, the state's bald eagle nests topped the 150-mark. It was an extraordinary jump, one that helped agency biologists better understand

the capabilities of this rugged bird in friendlier environmental conditions.

Looking back today, Paul Nickerson, now retired after 37 years with the USFWS, said he almost fell out of his chair when briefed that Pennsylvania had 237 eagle nests in 2012. “The biological potential for eagles there is certainly reached and their success suggests Pennsylvania’s habitat appears to be as good as it gets!”

Nickerson looks back fondly on his role as a planner of the bald eagle reintroduction in the Northeast. As dire as the situation was for bald eagles when DDT was in use, wildlife managers saw improving conditions in the Northeast within a decade after the pesticide—and other organochlorines—were banned. “We decided it could be done and then went forward with it. Today, eagles are everywhere in the Northeast. There’s a good lesson there!”

Clearly, Pennsylvania—and probably the Northeast—has more bald eagles today than anytime in the past two centuries. The Northeast has seen its population double over the past decade. In fact, the future couldn’t be much brighter for bald eagles.

The good news is that eagles continue to flourish in this state. There seems little doubt the number of nests in state will continue to increase. Tips on new nests come to the PGC monthly, sometimes weekly.

Doug Gross, agency endangered and nongame bird section supervisor, noted that although bald eagles have tremendous powers of flight, they tend to colonize new nest sites at relatively conservative distances. “The median natal dispersal distance for bald eagles has been estimated to be 43 miles,”

Gross said. “Most streams are colonized stepwise up or down the drainage from active nests. The biggest known leap in Pennsylvania was when two birds hatched at Shohola Falls took up residence in the Grand Canyon/Pine Creek valley (about 130 miles) back in the late ’80s.

Our southwestern counties are now the last region of the state for bald eagles to recolonize. They’ve established a few nests there, but there’s room for much, much more, according to Gross.

“There’s still plenty of potential in the Southwest for expansion of this population,” Gross explained. “They’re already nesting in the Pittsburgh suburbs; why not more along the Monongahela, the Youghiogheny? I believe time is all that stands in the way of eagles completely reoccupying this last Pennsylvania frontier. When they do, and as nesting pairs continue to fill unclaimed habitats elsewhere in state, it’s surely only a matter of time—probably a few years—until Pennsylvania hits the 300-nest milestone.”

Three hundred bald eagle nests would eclipse the Commonwealth’s early 1980s nesting low of three nests 10,000 percent. That’s a comeback! Epic and extraordinary. A product of environmental reform, political intervention and scientific ingenuity. It’s an accomplishment for which every Pennsylvanian should be proud; one that should remind all of us immediately of the eagle’s incredible recovery, as well as its enduring representation of American strength and freedom.

In the not too distant future, it would appear the bald eagle will be removed from the ranks of Pennsylvania threatened species. It’s already happened on the national level; they

were delisted from the national endangered/threatened species rolls in 2006. When that day comes for Pennsylvania, bald eagles will be all the way back from the brink. Until then, all of us should take pride in the tremendous progress that has been made for eagles and know that their future is more secure than it has been in a long, long time. 🦅