

Nature at Risk Series

The American bald eagle flies high once more

Brodhead Watershed

In 1983, the bald eagle had all but disappeared from Pennsylvania's woodland creeks and lakes.

Just three nests remained across the state — the population crashing toward oblivion all across the country, as the pesticide DDT made the birds' eggs so thin that they often broke in the nest.

Even before DDT, eagles were in trouble.

Their habitat was disappearing. They were being shot to protect livestock, (even though they eat mostly fish and scavenge carrion). It was going to take action to save our national emblem, symbol of strength and freedom.

On December 2, 1970, President Nixon signed a bi-partisan bill establishing the Environmental Protection Agency. Two years later, the EPA went out on a limb, banning the use of DDT in the U.S.

It was highly controversial. There was a lot of pushback. But it was the first essential step.

After the Endangered Species Act was passed, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) was listed as endangered through most of its range. That gave the Fish and Wildlife Service, and its partners, tools to help support the birds' recovery — such as captive breeding programs, nest site protection, and reintroduction work.

By 2007, there were nearly 10,000 nesting pairs. Today, the population is estimated at over 300,000 individuals.

Even for novice birders, eagles are easy to spot. Their size is the first clue. Though turkey vultures are about as big — with a wing span of six feet — eagles' bright white head and tail and their soaring flight set them apart. Eagles are long-lived, up to 30 years in the wild, and though they are solitary for most of the year, they mate for life.



Photo by Ray Roper

From just three nests in the whole state in 1983, to today, in just the watershed of the Brodhead Watershed, most people live within a mile or two of an active eagle nest.

Success stories as dramatic as this one are few and far between. Thousands of creatures around the world are at risk: from the smallest insects, salamanders, frogs and birds to gentle manatees and 100-ton whales.

As we celebrate the successful return of the only native American eagle, it's worth finding out more about critters still teetering on the edge:
<https://earth.org/endangered-species-in-the-us/>

Meanwhile, keep your eyes peeled — you may spot an eagle today!