

Great American Comeback: The Return of the Bald Eagle to Middlesex County, New Jersey

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I. The Decline and Recovery of the Bald Eagle

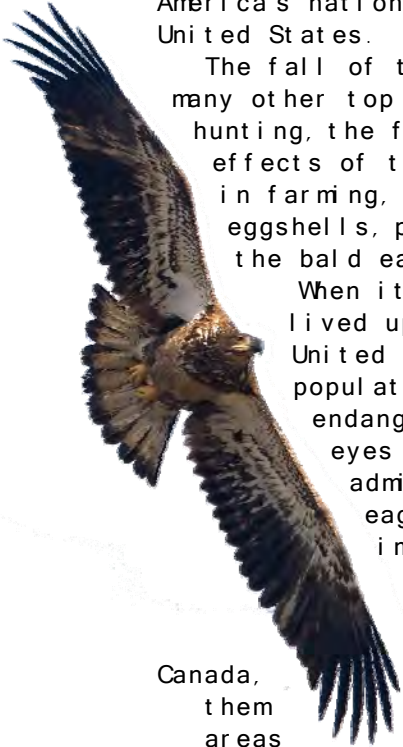
In the 1980's, there was exactly one bald eagle nest in all of New Jersey. America's national symbol was all but eradicated from the entire eastern United States.

The fall of the bald eagle was a tragic tale of loss that mirrored that of many other top predators. After declining in numbers habitat loss and hunting, the final nail in the coffin appeared to be the egg-destroying effects of the insecticide dichloro-diphenyl-trichloroethane—or DDT. Used in farming, DDT went up through the food chain and weakened eagle eggshells, preventing new birds from hatching. Like the peregrine falcon, the bald eagle's numbers declined precipitously.

When it was named our national symbol in 1782, the bald eagle truly lived up to its title, ranging throughout the entire continental United States and Alaska. Two hundred years later, the eagle population was so decimated that it became one of our first endangered species. Rachel Carson's *A Silent Spring* opened America's eyes to the dangers of DDT, and President Richard M. Nixon's administration banned DDT domestically and protected the bald eagle nationwide. Yet the mighty bird's recovery was hardly imminent.

Here in New Jersey, state biologists took matters into their own hands in the 1980's, with just a handful of bald eagles remaining. Biologists brought in young eagle chicks from Canada, and released them into New Jersey's wilder areas after raising them in captivity. By the 1990's, the eagles had recolonized much of the southern half of the state, particularly around the Delaware Bayfront. Yet in the more densely populated areas of the state, like Middlesex County, bald eagles remained a rare sighting indeed.

Not anymore. Since 2000, we have had at least 50 sightings in our small, highly developed county, with each year yielding more sightings than the previous one. In the first half of 2007 alone, residents have already



reported a dozen bald eagle sightings. And in tiny Highland Park, there have been at least 25 sightings since 2000.

With its seven-foot wingspan and striking white head, each bald eagle sighting is never to be forgotten. Arnold Henderson of the Highland Park Environmental Commission says, "My first eagle sighting, at Donaldson Park, was the most spectacular. A high black dot crumpled its wings and dropped toward the river, turning into an adult bald eagle with white head and tail that snatched a fish just a few yards from me, then carried it off. Seeing an eagle actually fishing, plus reports now coming in every season, suggests the eagles use Highland Park's Raritan as foraging grounds, not just migration flyovers."

Indeed, Highland Park and its surrounding Raritan River Greenbelt have become a favored spot for bald eagles, which mate for life and can live as long as 20 years. As the river has bounced back ecologically over the last decade, wildlife has followed—and the bald eagle is no exception. The Raritan River Greenbelt holds one preserve after another, and even the riverfront landfills have seen decades of natural recovery result in substantial wildlife habitat and foraging areas.

In Highland Park and Piscataway, the old-growth forest of Rutgers Ecological Preserve sits inland from the riverfront mudflats of Johnson Park, and downstream the open expanse of Donaldson Park gives way to the densely wooded Highland Park Meadows. Across the Raritan, bald eagles find open space in riverfront parks like Buccleuch Park and Boyd Park in New Brunswick, and further



downstream in Edgeboro Landfill in East Brunswick. Likewise, the Valley of the Dumps—ILR Landfill, Edison Landfill, and Kin-Buc Landfill—may be forbidding to most visitors, but for bald eagles, their remoteness and recovering riverfront habitat offer opportunities for uninterrupted feeding in the Raritan River. And with the fish population bouncing back dramatically in recent years, bald eagles and osprey have a veritable smorgasbord awaiting them on the Raritan.

The eagle is also making appearances in other areas of Middlesex County, from Mill Pond in Milltown to Plainsboro Preserve in Cranbury to Cheesequake State Park in Old Bridge. Against all odds, the bald eagle is a Middlesex County fixture again.

Even for Kathy Clark, the principal biologist with the state Endangered and Nongame Species Program who has tracked the bald eagle's recovery since its lowest point, there remains a sense of wonder about the bald eagle's recovery from near-extinction.

"It's still unbelievable to me, it really is," she said. "Who would've thought this could happen in New Jersey?"

II.

BALD EAGLE SIGHTINGS IN MIDDLESEX COUNTY

SEE FOLLOWING MAP
FOR DETAILS

III.

*Highland Park's
Raritan River Greenbelt*

IV.

Bal d Eagle Si ght i ngs i n M ddl esex Count y		
Dat e	Locat i on	City
8/12/00	Johnson Park on the Raritan River, off Route 18	Hi ghland Park
10/30/01	Johnson Park	Hi ghland Park
3/29/02	Johnson Park	Hi ghland Park
10/26/03	Across the Raritan River from Donaldson Park	New Brunswi ck
11/13/03	Johnson Park	Hi ghland Park
2/14/04	Johnson Park	Hi ghland Park
2/14/04	Raritan River –D&R Towpath	New Brunswi ck
5/23/04	Across the Raritan River from Donaldson Park	New Brunswi ck
6/16/04	Johnson Park	Hi ghland Park
8/1/04	ILR Landfill	Edi son
1/6/05	Across the Raritan River from Donaldson Park	New Brunswi ck
2/3/05	Marshes off Route 535	Sayreville/South Amboy
2/5/05	The marsh on Major Dr.	Sayreville
3/11/05	Across the Raritan River from Donaldson Park	New Brunswi ck
5/18/05	Johnson Park	Hi ghland Park
6/28/05	Mill Pond	Milltown
6/29/05	Johnson Park	Hi ghland Park
6/29/05	Hi ghland Park Meadows	Hi ghland Park
7~8/2005	ILR Landfill	Edi son
10/3/05	Donaldson Park	Hi ghland Park
10/23/05	Donaldson Park	Hi ghland Park
2/1/06	Raritan River by Donaldson Park	Hi ghland Park
2/19/06	Donaldson Park	Hi ghland Park
3/22/06	Raritan River by Donaldson Park	Hi ghland Park
5~7/2006	ILR Landfill	Edi son
6/10/06	Donaldson Park	Hi ghland Park
7/1/06	Donaldson Park	Hi ghland Park

10/1/06	WCTC radio tower in The Meadows	Highland Park
11/1/06	Donaldson Park, Meadows	Highland Park
12/1/06	n/a	East Brunswick
12/16/06	Cheesequake State Park	Matawan
12/30/06	Edgeboro Landfill	East Brunswick
12/30/06	South/Western part of the Raritan Circle	Milbourn
12/30/06	South Side of the Raritan River	South River
1/1/07	Farrington Lake	East Brunswick
2/1/07	Donaldson Park	Highland Park
2/3/07	Landing Lane Canal	New Brunswick
2/7/07	Donaldson Park	Highland Park
3/9/07	904 River Road	Piscataway
4/6/07	Raritan Bay Waterfront	South Amboy
4/15/07	Johnson Park	Highland Park
4/15/07	Donaldson Park	Highland Park
4/28-29/07	Johnson Park	Highland Park
5/12/07	Edgeboro Landfill	East Brunswick
5/18/07	Johnson Park	Highland Park
5/25/07	Johnson Park	Highland Park
6/12/07	Johnson Park	Highland Park
6/20/07	Donaldson Park	Highland Park
6/24/07	South 4th Avenue	Highland Park
n/a	Plainsboro Preserve	Plainsboro
n/a	US 1 south	South Brunswick



V. About Edison Wetlands Association

Founded by Bob Spiegel in 1989, Edison Wetlands Association (EWA) is a leading New Jersey environmental organization dedicated to protecting human health and the environment through the cleanup of hazardous waste sites and the preservation of open space and wildlife habitat in central New Jersey. EWA has testified before the U.S. Senate on the federal Superfund program three times, as well as before the National Academy of Sciences. EWA was honored by the New Jersey State Legislature in 2006, and was featured with a chapter in a 2002 national bestselling book by the late Molly Ivins.

EWA produced the first-ever comprehensive report on the Birds of Middlesex County, New Jersey, in April 2007. As part of our conservation program, EWA is the state leader in Brownfield-to-Greenfield projects, in which former industrial or commercial sites are remediated and transformed into thriving ecosystems and wildlife habitat with limited public access for passive recreation such as hiking and birdwatching. In fact, many of the best birding spots in Middlesex County are current or former brownfields—from the bald eagles spotted at Edgeboro Landfill in East Brunswick and Industrial Land Reclaiming Landfill in Edison to the bridges and towers used as perches by peregrine falcons and a wide range of hawks.

EWA saved the last farm in Edison, the Triple C Ranch, from development. The Triple C Ranch now offers a petting zoo, ecotours, environmental education, volunteer nature cleanups, and a new bird blind in the heart of the Dismal Swamp Conservation Area, the largest open space left in northern Middlesex County and home to over 180 species of birds. Through the Triple C Ranch and other areas, EWA works to introduce the public and schoolchildren to the nature in their backyards. For more information, visit www.edisonwetlands.org.

VI. About Highland Park and the Environmental Commission

With four parks alongside the Raritan Riverfront, Highland Park is a hidden gem for nature lovers and a wide range of wildlife, including threatened and endangered species. Highland Park offers the Rutgers Ecological Preserve, Johnson Park, Highland Park Meadows, Donaldson Park and the Native Plant Reserve on River Road, where the Borough is also building the Eugene Young Environmental and Education Center. Each of these riverfront preserves offers excellent opportunities for birders and wildlife watchers in the middle of suburbia.

The Environmental Commission conducts research into the use of open land areas of the Borough, keeps an index of all public or private open areas and recommends programs for the development and use of such lands to the Planning Board. The commission reviews the potential effects of applications before the Planning and the Zoning Boards, provides environmental information to residents, much of it in its collection of publications at the public library. The commission consists of seven members, and meetings are held the third Wednesday of the month in Borough Hall.

VII. Acknowledgments

We gratefully thank all those who helped on this report, particularly:

- Bob Spiegel from Edison Wetlands Association;
- Mayor Meryl Frank of Highland Park;
- Highland Park's Bald Eagle sightings compilations by Joanne Williams, www.leoraw.com/hpenv/;
- Kathy Clark of New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Fish & Wildlife;
- the Friends of the Rutgers Ecological Preserve, www.rutgerspreserve.org;
- New Jersey Audubon Society's Sandy Hook Bird Observatory, New Jersey Breeding Bird Atlas, and South Amboy checklist, as well as their rare bird sightings across the state, <http://www.nj.audubon.org/Tools.Net/Sightings/VoiceOf.aspx>;
- Dr. Len Soucy of the Raptor Trust;
- the East Brunswick Environmental Commission, www.nj.naturnotes.com;
- the Audubon Society's Christmas Bird Count;
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology;
- the staffs at Plainsboro Preserve and Cheesequake State Park,
- as well as all the dedicated birders throughout Middlesex County and New Jersey who shared their sharp-eyed observations for this report, particularly Arnold Henderson, Richard Wolfert, Robert Stern, Gabi Grunstein, Corey Ross, Belinda Beetham, Mary Beetham, and Michael Rothkopf.

Photograph Credits:

Cover: Steve Mattan, Edgewater Park, NJ

Flying Immature Eagle: Robert Lego, Cape May, NJ

Eagle at ILR Landfill electrical tower: Bill Schultz, Raritan Riverkeeper

Flying Eagle Succession: Brian Hardiman, Raccoon Ridge, NJ

Eagle flying with red-tailed hawk: Tom Smith, Lafayette, NJ

American Flag Eagle: Melanie Wrob, Edison Wetlands Association



VII.

Reporting

Future Rare Sightings

We encourage anyone spotting a Bald Eagle in Middlesex County to contact Edison Wetlands Association for inclusion on subsequent versions of this report via:

Email: ewainfo@edisonwetlands.org
Mail: 2035 Route 27, Suite 1190, Edison, NJ 08817
Telephone: 732-287-5111
Fax: 732-287-5129

Any sighting of a bald eagle should also be reported to the New Department of Environmental Protection at 609-292-9400, or by filling out a sighting report form found on the NJDEP website, <http://www.nj.gov/dep/fgw/ensp/rprtformhtm>. All entries will help to build the Natural Heritage inventory, which helps the state develop critical habitat mapping and understand habitat population trends to develop conservation strategies.

We also encourage you to report sightings of the bald eagle to New Jersey Audubon Society's hotline at 732-872-2500. For more information on reporting rare sightings, please visit the New Jersey Bird Records Committee site at <http://www.princeton.edu/~llarson/reportto.html>.



FACT SHEET

Scientific Name: *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

Official National Bird of the United States: Bald Eagle

New Jersey Status: Endangered

Federal Status: As of June 29, 2007, the bald eagle was delisted from its Threatened status.

Length: 32 inches **Wingspan:** 80 inches

Weight: 6.6 -13.9 lbs

Life Span: 48 years in captivity. However, in the wild its life is significantly reduced.

Identification: Adult bald eagles have a full white head & tail with a dark brown body and yellow bill, which develops in their fifth year. The bald eagle is a large, broad-winged, broad-tailed hawk. Although both sexes have similar plumage, the female eagle is larger. Prior to this stage their plumage is a mottled brown and white.

Call: Call high-pitched whistling or piping

Diet: The bald eagle is a predator with a strong, hooked beak used for tearing food and taloned feet to capture prey. Bald eagles forage mainly for fish but also eat other waterfowl, small mammals and carrion. It is a common occurrence for the bald eagle to steal food from other raptors.

Habitat: Typically found in forests adjacent to rivers.

In central New Jersey they are present on inland large open waters such as reservoirs, lakes and rivers that empty into the Atlantic Ocean. Nesting areas require locations that are safe from human disturbance. Bald eagles choose to build their large nests in a "super-canopy" tree, the canopy of a forest is at the topmost layer where the branches of the trees spread apart, which provides shelter in the crown.

They also forage using large perch trees near open water.

Number of Nests in NJ: 63 Bald Eagle Nests, 3 in central New Jersey

Origin of Name: The word choice "bald" is actually the abbreviated form of the word "piebald." Piebald describes something that is spotted or patchy, especially in black and white.

Yes, I'd like to support
Edison Wetlands Association!

Name _____