Notes

Winter Records of Bald Eagles, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, in Interior Alaska

ROBERT J. RITCHIE[1] and ROBERT E. AMBROSE[2]

[1]Alaska Biological Research, P.O. Box 81934, Fairbanks, Alaska 99708
[2]United States Fish and Wildlife Service, 1412 Airport Way, Fairbanks, Alaska 99701

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Adult Bald Eagles were recorded on winter surveys in 1979, 1980, and in 1982-1984 on the Tanana River (64° N, 145° W). This is 400 km north of their normal winter range. Possible reasons for this regular and surprising winter occurrence are prey concentrations and a sizeable breeding population of eagles, some of which may benefit from wintering there and nesting earlier than migrants.

Key Words: Bald Eagle, *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, Alaska, distribution, winter.

The bays and river mouths of southcentral Alaska (61° N) are generally considered the northern limit in the continuous range of the Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) in North America (Figure 1, adapted from Steenhof (1978)). Nearly complete ice coverage of inland waterbodies north of the Alaska Range and an extension of sea ice north of the Alaska Peninsula severely limit possibilities for Bald Eagles to winter above 61° N. Gabrielson and Lincoln (1959) suggested that Bald Eagles from interior Alaska moved to the Alaskan coast or farther in winter.

However, we have regularly observed and recorded Bald Eagles 400 km north of their normal winter range. In January 1979 we located eight adult Bald Eagles on the Tanana River or its tributaries between Fairbanks and Delta (Figure 1). We also recorded three adults in the area during each winter aerial survey of 1980, 1982 and 1983, and five Bald Eagles in 1984. Approximately 30 to 50 km of open water existed in this area each year.

Two factors may account for this regular but surprising winter occurrence. First, the region has one of the most dense Bald Eagle breeding populations in the interior of Alaska (Ritchie 1981) and some wintering Bald Eagles apparently belong to this population. Observations at two nests for the past four years revealed that birds roosted near nests in winter and began incubation as much as one month earlier than migrant Bald Eagles in the same area. Overwintering on the breeding grounds may give birds a competitive advantage in securing territories and initiating breeding.

Second, open water along the Tanana River attracts and concentrates certain prey species, especially spawning salmon *Oncorhynchus* sp., Mallard *Anas platyrhynchos*, and Common Merganser, *Mergus merganser*. All have been identified in prey remains at Bald Eagle nest sites in the area (Ritchie 1981). The extent of open water and abundance of salmon and waterfowl may be critical. Although smaller open water areas on the Toklat River have regularly attracted mallards and are used for spawning by salmon (Sheldon 1909; P. Valkenburg, (personal communication), we know of no Bald Eagle observations in midwinter at this location.

Records of Bald Eagles overwintering in northern boreal forests are rare. D. Whitfield, University of Alberta (personal communication) has recorded a few near Calgary, Alberta, as well as December sightings on the Saskatchewan River. Preble (1908) recorded Bald Eagles in winter near Great Slave Lake, Northwest Territories. Our sightings near Delta (64°05′N, 145° W) are the northernmost reported in winter in North America.

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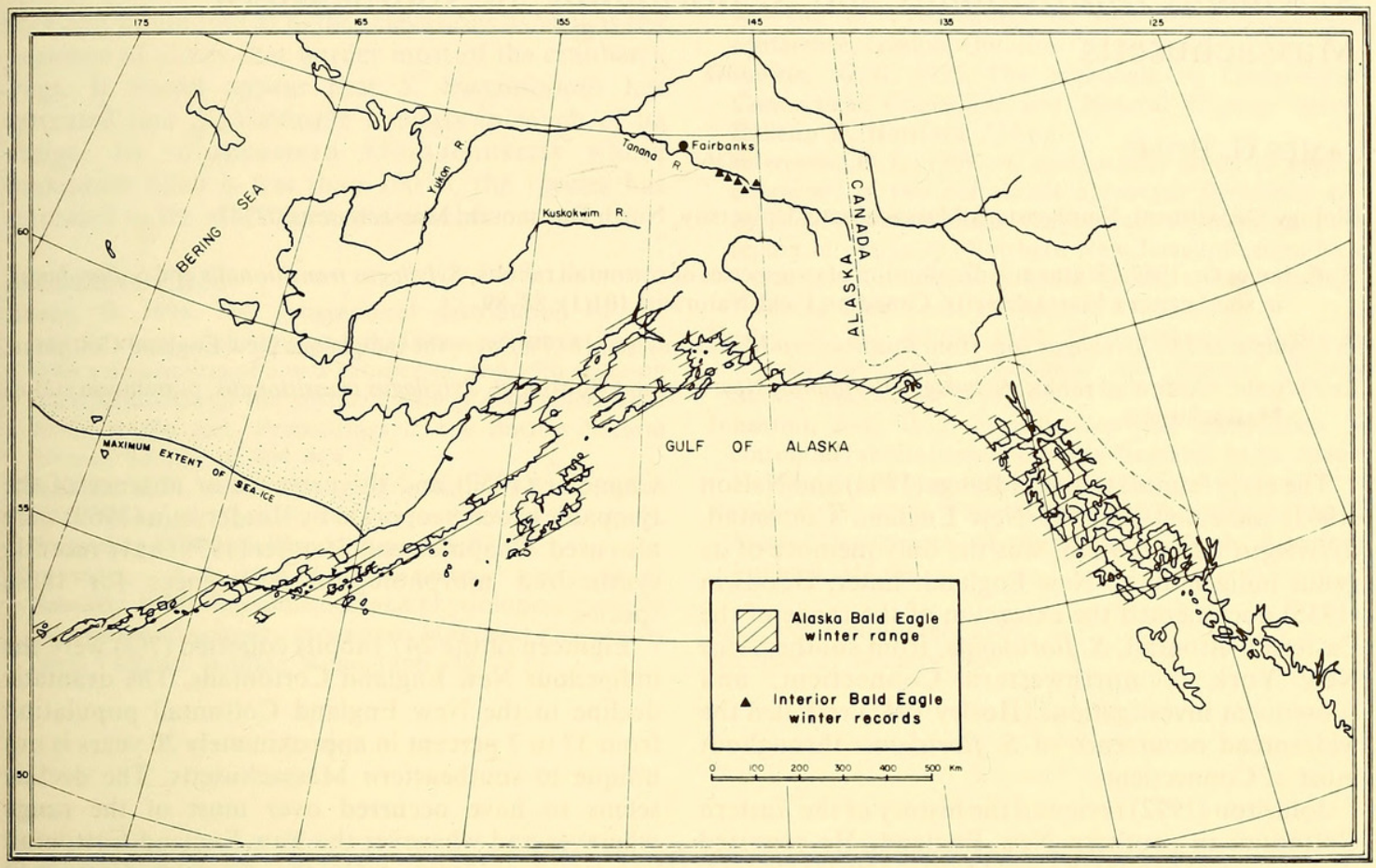

FIGURE 1. Bald Eagle winter distribution in Alaska (adapted from Steenhof (1978)) and interior Alaska records.

MacDonald, University of Alaska, Fairbanks, kindly provided access to unpublished records.

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