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Eagles In Massachusetts

Massachusetts Division Of Fisheries and Wildlife

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It is a sad comment on America that our national bird, the bald eagle, was unprotected until 1940. Today it is among the most strictly protected forms of wildlife, and anyone who kills or even harasses an eagle is subject to arrest, heavy fines and imprisonment. And yet the eagle has not returned in its former numbers. Man has taken its habitat, poisoned it with insecticides, and electrocuted it on power lines. Despite tough laws, many eagles still die of gunshot wounds every year. And even eagle admirers unintentionally harass the birds as they try to get "just a little closer" with their cameras and field glasses. As a result no eagle has nested in Massachusetts for well over a hundred years.

Most people, even those who have never seen a bald eagle, could identify the adult bird on sight. It stands about three feet high, has a dark brown body with a white head, neck and tail, and a 6 foot + wingspan. As in most birds of prey, females are usually larger than males. Young eagles look quite different. Basically dark and often streaked and spotted with white, they do not assume adult coloration until their fourth or fifth year.

When the colonists first arrived in Massachusetts they found eagles breeding throughout the state, particularly on Cape Cod where fish, the eagle's favored food, were available all year round. But settlements increased, gradually the timber was cut, land was cleared, rivers were dammed, and the wilderness, along with much of its fish and wildlife, disappeared. In the ignorance of the time most people were glad to see eagles removed from the landscape as any bird of prey was regarded as a livestock killer. Some people actually believed that eagles would carry off the babies and small children!

Faced with such persecution eagle numbers declined drastically and nesting eagles vanished from many states, including Massachusetts. But there was still plenty of good habitat for nesting in the deep South and to the North. Southern bald eagles visited Massachusetts during

May and June, while northern birds were fairly common throughout the year, especially during winter.

Then came modern civilization and technology. Increasing development, a growing human population, and the pollution of the food chain by DDT and similar chemicals have taken their toll. Perhaps two or three eagles remain around Quabbin Reservoir throughout the year, another dozen or so spend part of the winter there, and the coastal areas of the state support an odd visitor or two at any given season.

Although eagles sometimes take their own game in the form of waterfowl and small mammals, they are primarily fishermen and scavengers. They apparently prefer fish to all other foods, and rarely take up residence far from a large body of water. They usually catch their own, but they have nothing against stealing from an otter, merganser or osprey.

The eagles which winter at Quabbin are a unique population in that they rely heavily on deer carcasses for food. Deer which have been chased onto the ice by dogs or coyotes often fall and never get up again. The eagles, have learned to take advantage of this dependable windfall. They generally leave their night roosts before sunrise and make their way to the nearest carcass where they feed until mid-morning. In late afternoon they usually return to earth for another feeding, and then head back to their roosts for the night.

If you would like to see an eagle, Quabbin offers you the best chance. Eagle numbers usually peak during February and March, then taper off as the ice goes out. The best place from which to watch the Quabbin eagles is the Enfield Lookout, just off Route 9 in Belchertown. A spotting scope or powerful pair of binoculars are a necessity. Do not attempt to get closer to the eagles. They will not tolerate a human's approach, even at a distance of several hundred yards. The attempt would interfere with the eagle's feeding, putting undue stress on the bird, and would make you subject to arrest.

Programs are already underway to learn more about the Massachusetts eagles, and hopefully to bring back nesting eagles. In 1979 the first statewide eagle survey took place. Organized by the National Wildlife Federation's Raptor Information Center, various bird clubs and private persons, along with personnel from Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife, Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Corps of Engineers and the MDC all went out to look for eagles for an entire day. The grand total: 9 eagles, one which was a golden eagle. Eight were on or around Quabbin, emphasizing the value of this relatively undisturbed area for wildlife, while the odd eagle was sighted on Nantucket.

The Massachusetts Division of Fisheries and Wildlife hopes to raise an eagle at Quabbin someday, hopefully on an annual basis. The hatchling will come from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Maryland, where sick or injured eagles are restored to health and induced to breed in captivity. The hatchling will never see its human foster parents; thus when it is ready to leave it will relate to other eagles, and not to people. Such a program has already shown considerable success in returning the endangered peregrine falcon to the wild, and New York has already done it with eagles.