

## How Georgia saved the Bald Eagle

Dear Editor, The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service announced on June 28 that it would remove bald eagles from the Endangered Species List. Bald eagles now number 11,040 breeding pairs in the continental U.S. and have returned to every state and the District of Columbia. Georgia has 113 pairs.

There were an estimated half a million bald eagles when the Pilgrims arrived. It was adopted as the national symbol in 1782. However, bald eagles were unfairly branded vermin and a threat to livestock and valued for their feathers. They were fed to hogs in Maine, shot from airplanes in California, poisoned in South Dakota, and hunted under a 50-cent bounty in Alaska, where 100,000 eagles were killed between 1917 and 1950.

The 1940 Bald Eagle Protection Act prohibited the taking, possession or commerce of eagles. But their habitat continued to be logged, plowed and converted to farmland and housing. Eagles were extirpated from many states long before the pesticide DDT became prevalent. DDT dealt the final blow, thinning their eggshells and that of other fish-eating birds, causing their reproductive success to crash. By 1963, there were only 417 pairs in the lower 48 states. Their habitat finally received protection with the 1967 Endangered Species Act. The listing of bald eagles, Peregrine falcons and brown pelicans was a major factor in the decision to ban DDT in 1972.

Bald eagles were common along Georgia's coast and in the Okefenokee Swamp, less so along major rivers, swamps and wetlands in the lower coastal plain, and rare elsewhere. By 1970, the only active nest was on St. Catherine's Island. In 1973, Georgia enacted the Endangered Wildlife Act and listed bald eagles as a state endangered species the following year. No nesting occurred in the state between 1971 and 1977. In 1979, the Department of Natural Resources, Wildlife Resources Division hacked two young birds from the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center on Sapelo Island. The program was moved to Butler Island in the Altamaha River delta in 1984 and expanded to Lake Allatoona in 1988. In all, 89 eagles were reintroduced to Georgia. The nesting population reached 113 pairs in 2007.

The protection of eagle habitat incidentally saved other rare and endangered species and led to the creation of the 5,000-acre national wildlife refuge at Bond Swamp in central Georgia, which 8,000 people visited last year.

As Georgia celebrates the bald eagle's success, it is worth noting the other species in the state that the Endangered Species Act is rescuing. The list of species include the shortnosed sturgeon, snail darter, Kirtland's warbler, whooping crane, grey bat, red-cockaded woodpecker, American alligator, the U.S. wood stork, Atlantic piping plover and Florida manatee. The fin and humpback whales and Atlantic green, Kemps Ridley, loggerhead and leatherback sea turtle all occur in Georgia waters. Along with the bald eagle, the arctic and American Peregrine falcon and the brown pelican have recovered and fly in Georgia skies.

Each of these unique and irreplaceable creatures, thanks to the Endangered Species Act, may yet have a chance.

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Millet is a member of the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit conservation organization with 35,000 members dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.