

With New York's help, eagles leave the endangered list

By Will Hodges

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. New York has its own 123 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 a hundred thousand 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 eggs to break during incubation.

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 commonly nested in New York in the 19th century, began declining in the early 1900s, were rare by the 1950s and dwindled to virtual extirpation in the 1960s. By 1974, the state population consisted of a single, non-reproducing pair in Livingston County. To save the species, New York instituted the first systematic reintroduction program with a combination of egg transplants, chick fostering and eaglet hacking.

Though unable to produce their own eggs, the Livingston County pair successfully accepted and fledged eight foster eagles over a five-year period. Between 1976 and 1988, 198 eaglets were brought to New York and hacked into the wild.

The first reintroduction consisted of two birds at the Montezuma National Wildlife Refuge, which was believed to be free of DDT. After 13 years of hard work, the eagle population began to expand on its own, jumping from three pairs in 1988 to about 123 in 2007.

The state reintroduction program ended in 1988, but New York City recently took up the cause, releasing 20 Wisconsin-born eaglets in Ironwood Hill Park at the northern tip of Manhattan between 2002 and 2006.

New York's other species with endangered status protection include the short-nosed sturgeon, the Atlantic piping plover, the Arctic and Atlantic peregrine falcon, the brown pelican and Karner blue butterfly. Each of these remains a part of our living mosaic and, thanks to the Endangered Species Act, may yet have a chance.

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