

Fact Sheet: Bald Eagles nesting and incubating at U.S. National Arboretum
Prepared by ARS Information Office Staff

Bald Eagles at U.S. National Arboretum

For the first time since 1947, a bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) pair is nesting inside the grounds of the U.S. National Arboretum (USNA). USNA staff first noticed the nesting pair in early January on the south side of Mount Hamilton, in the Arboretum's Azalea Collection. The USNA is part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

USNA staff noticed the nest in January, watching the pair make trips back and forth to the nest site. The eagles' behavior changed towards the end of January, when one started sitting on the nest at all times, while the other searched for food to feed its mate. This was an indication that the pair was now incubating eggs. It is unknown how many eggs are in the nest, but there are usually one to three eggs. It takes an average of thirty-five days for eggs to hatch, which means there may be eaglets as early as March 7th, depending upon the number of eggs laid and when incubation began.

Protecting Bald Eagles at U.S. National Arboretum

Although the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service removed the bald eagle from the list of threatened and endangered species under the Endangered Species Act, the bird continues to be protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. Both laws prohibit killing, selling, or otherwise disturbing eagles, their nests, or eggs.

The USNA is taking steps to protect the nesting pair of eagles and minimize disturbances. People, noise, and related distractions in the vicinity of a bald eagle nest can cause the nesting pair to abandon their nest and eggs. USNA has restricted access to an area within approximately 660 feet around the nesting site during the critical nesting period, ending around mid-June.

The azalea collection flanks the hillsides of Mount Hamilton, which is 240 feet above sea level, and one of the highest points in the District of Columbia. Thousands of people visit Mount Hamilton when azaleas are in bloom each spring. However, to protect the eagles and maintain the radius area around the nest, pedestrian and automobile access will necessarily be restricted in the area. Roads leading to this area will also be closed, so vehicular access to a large portion of the Azalea Collection is restricted. However, the majority of the Azalea Collection will remain open to pedestrians.

USNA appreciates the public's understanding and support of this situation and will provide updates on the nesting pair of eagles and any other steps taken to minimize disruptions in the area around the nest at www.usna.usda.gov.

History of the U.S. Bald Eagle

The bald eagle is the only eagle unique to North America. Bald eagles may live for 30 years in the wild, they pair for life, and nests are used for many years and can weigh up to 4,000 pounds. The event of a new bald eagle nest at the Arboretum is a success story for a number of reasons. It is estimated that there were between 100,000 and 500,000 bald eagles in North America in the

1700s. Through hunting, habitat loss, loss of prey species, decline of water quality, and the introduction of contaminants like DDT (dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane), populations declined, then plummeted to only 417 breeding pairs in the lower forty-eight states in 1963. It was feared that bald eagles would soon go extinct.

DDT was a heavily used insecticide, and especially harmful to bald eagles, predators at the top of the food chain. DDT accumulated in the birds' tissues, reaching concentrations that caused egg shells to be too thin for adults to incubate. When an eagle sat on the thin-shelled eggs, they would be crushed under the weight of the well-intentioned parent. Since it takes four to five years for an eagle to achieve sexual maturity, entire generations were being lost. DDT was suspected to be the main cause in the declining populations of osprey, peregrine falcons, and even pelicans.

In 1972, DDT was banned in the United States. In 1973, a landmark piece of conservation legislation was passed, the Endangered Species Act (ESA). The ESA provided additional protections and funding for the recovery of species deemed threatened or endangered. Bald eagle numbers have rebounded since the 1970s. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) census in 2006 counted 9,789 breeding pairs in the lower forty-eight states. With such an impressive recovery, the bald eagle was removed from the Endangered Species List in 2007. It is estimated that there may be as many as 11,000 breeding pairs in 2015.