

# Bald Eagles Nesting at the National Arboretum

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## New Family at the National Arboretum

A new family has set up residence at the U.S. National Arboretum in Washington, DC. For the first time in nearly seventy years, a pair of bald eagles (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) is nesting there.

Arboretum staff began to notice the nest in January and then watched 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 have been eaglets as early as Saturday, March 7<sup>th</sup>. It depends on the number of eggs laid and when incubation began.



Bald eagle incubating eggs at the National Arboretum (February 2015).



Bald eagle monitoring the Arboretum nest from a distance (January 2015).

### **Why Did They Choose the National Arboretum?**

The National Arboretum is a perfect place for a new pair of nesting eagles, but why did they choose it? There are a number of reasons. When looking at real estate, it is all about prime location. Bald eagles require a steady food source for feeding their hungry eaglets. The Arboretum's eastern boundary is the Anacostia River. With a supply of fish in close proximity, it is much easier to make constant trips to find food.

The Arboretum also has a number of mature trees that are large enough to support an eagle's nest. The current nest is approximately five feet wide by three feet deep. Eagles will return and reuse the same nest year after year, often increasing its size. The largest nest on record weighed nearly a ton! The tree selected by this pair is large enough to support a nest, is within sight distance of the river, and is also located in one of the few parts of the District with limited human disturbance. Bald eagles are very sensitive to disturbance while nesting, especially when nesting in a new location. Even though this nest is in an urban area, the Arboretum provides quality wildlife habitat and enough open space to dampen the commotion and noise from the city.

### How Did This All Start?

The story of this nest may have begun with the [Earth Conservation Corps'](#) (ECC) efforts in the 1990s to bring bald eagles back to DC by raising eaglets from Wisconsin in a tree on land adjacent to the Arboretum along the Anacostia River. It cannot be proven, however, whether these are descendants of the introduced eagles, or others looking for a new territory. The story does appear to date to Spring 2014 when a lone male bald eagle began roosting on [Kingman Island](#). The eagle would survey the Anacostia River system daily, returning to Kingman Island every evening at sunset. Fall began and bald eagles began migrating through the District. It wasn't long until he seemed to have found a partner.



Bald eagle on Kingman Island (May 2014).

The two eagles began to fly together, conducting pair bonding flights. These are tests of stamina and vitality, as they size each other up as potential mates. The flights went on for a few weeks in September and October 2014.



Bald eagles performing bonding flights (October 2014).  
Male eagle on left, female eagle on right.

Between bonding flights, the pair defended the area from a number of migrating eagles, chasing off two or three at a time. In November 2014, an ECC member observed one of the eagles carrying sticks. This behavior is an indicator of nest building, which would hopefully lead to an active nest. The pair was not seen in December, and it was possible they had aborted the nesting attempt. It was fantastic news when Arboretum staff spotted a large nest on their campus in January 2015.

### **Timeline for the Arboretum Nest**

It is not known when the first egg was laid, or if there are several eggs. The beginning of incubation can only be estimated. The period of incubation takes an average of 35 days. Bald eagles have evolved to deal with cold temperatures during incubation. As long as the parents have been attentive and the eggs have not been exposed to cold, the eggs should be viable. After hatching, eaglets are unable to thermoregulate, or control their body temperature. This is a critical time for young birds, and disturbance can result in nest failure. If the chicks survive, they will be able to sit up at around 4 weeks of age. At 6 weeks, brown feathers will start to grow. At 10 weeks, they will begin to reach full size and show true juvenile plumage. Most eagles will fledge at 80-90 days old.



Bald eagle on the National Arboretum nest (February 2015).