

## John W. Taylor 1947 Arboretum Bird List

In 1947 aspiring ornithological artist [John W. Taylor](#) created a list of all the birds he saw at the National Arboretum in a 12-month period. Among the 162 species was what Taylor deemed the "main ornithological attraction," the bald eagle. His list and a 1950 field notebook he kept are the only known evidence of the last bald eagle nest in Washington, DC, before the eagles returned to nest in 2000. The following are excerpts from his [handwritten list](#) and field notebook, which are preserved in the Special Collections of the [National Agricultural Library](#):

# THE BIRDS OF THE NATIONAL ARBORETUM



WASHINGTON, D. C.

JWT  
1947

John W. Taylor, Jr. - 1947 - JULY

The National Arboretum is the only place within the District of Columbia where the Bald Eagle still nests. From the nest, a gigantic structure on a hill near Bladensburg Road, one has a magnificent view of the city of Washington, The Washington Monument, the many downtown buildings and the Capitol of the United States, which long ago chose this great bird as the National emblem, are all visible.

BALD EAGLE - *Haliaeetus leucocephalus leucocephalus*

The Bald Eagle is the Arboretum's main ornithological attraction. A pair nests within a stone's throw of Bladensburg Road, N.E., within the District of Columbia. The nest, which is approximately 5 ft. in diameter, is roughly 75 feet up in large Maple. The birds frequent the nest area year round.

From John Taylor's 1950 Field Notebook:

February 4, 1950 notebook entry on the National Arboretum:

"A Song Sparrow's simple lay reflected a faint hope of spring and better times this morning, despite the brisk breeze that ruffled its feathers. How good it would be if we all could face the gales of life so dauntlessly, so hopefully!

Today's walk was confined within the grounds of the National Arboretum....Crows were screaming and hollering just within the gate, where the old Eagle was perched low and near the street. It flapped off that perch and sailed to another a bit farther up the hill (with crows in hot pursuit) at my approach. The nest site was not visited, for fear of disturbing the old birds too much, but this presence so close is a positive indication of their nesting. Some good views of the Eagle were enjoyed near the nest, and later by the river, where it was caught off guard."

Taylor, who lives near Mayo, Maryland, has visited the National Arboretum many times since 1947. In March 2015, he accepted the Arboretum's invitation to visit the new eagle nest and to share his memories about the one he documented decades earlier. He described the location of the earlier nest as across the hilltop from the current one and closer to the top of Mount Hamilton. The current nest is on the side that faces the river; the older nest was on the side that faces downtown DC. Taylor's many experiences watching eagles around the Chesapeake Bay have taught him that they are increasingly

comfortable in urban areas. He noted that in 1947 the area around the National Arboretum was rural, and the birds would have been much more isolated than they are today. Eagles born and raised around people and typical city noises are much less bothered by them, he believes, than those used to natural habitats.

Taylor grew up in Washington, DC, and walked to the relatively new National Arboretum to work as a seasonal laborer during the summers he was in high school. He worked with other men to cut along the roads and the stream banks and to weed the newly planted azalea hillside. Taylor remembers Oliver M. Freeman, a Department of Agriculture botanist, as being in charge of day-to-day operations at the Arboretum, and it was to him that he gave his handwritten bird list. Taylor felt the Arboretum should have such a list, just as, he had learned, other institutions did.

Taylor confesses that he was technically trespassing when he returned to the Arboretum on weekends during the school year to look for birds. He was so taken by its diverse habitats and wealth of bird species that he risked being caught by the patrolling guard in order to compile as complete a list as possible. He was pleased when the Arboretum began opening to the public on weekends during azalea season in 1949. Today, he takes full advantage of the Arboretum's year-round public hours, visiting whatever day he thinks he might spot a species not yet on his list.