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By Angela McLaughlin - Ramona Home Journal

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A symbol of freedom, the bald eagle was chosen as the national emblem of the United States in 1782, and has been depicted on many of our coins, including the quarter and half-dollar.



Bald eagles are easy to recognize by the white feathers on their heads. Photo by

As the only species of eagle unique to North America, the bald

Theirs is a story of survival.

Eagle populations were decimated in the 1950s, mainly due to the use of the insecticide DDT. They were eventually listed as an endangered species under the protection of the Endangered Species Act in the lower 48 states in 1967.

Dave Bittner, director of Wildlife Research Institute, which operates out of Julian, says that after DDT was banned for agricultural use in 1972, an effort to breed eagles in captivity and reintroduce them into the wild began. This included placing hatchlings into nests, so the parents would stay and continue breeding.

This effort proved to be successful, as the bald eagle population is considered recovered, and the species was delisted as endangered in 2007.

Though they are opportunistic feeders and will consume a variety of animals, bald eagles mainly feed on fish, living near lakes and other bodies of water to be near their food supply. These birds of prey were not originally found in most of Southern California — except perhaps on Catalina Island and near Torrey Pines State Reserve — due to the lack of freshwater and subsequent food sources.

"Eagles started adapting when more areas established reservoirs, and they started breeding around those areas," says Bittner, adding that the first breeding pair in San Diego County did not establish itself until 2002, near Lake Henshaw — they are still breeding today and have produced more than 35 young.

This pair is believed to be the parents of the eagles that currently reside in the Ramona Grasslands County Preserve, one of six breeding pairs in San Diego County.

These fascinating raptors are much larger than most people imagine. With a wingspan of seven to eight feet and weighing approximately 14 pounds, on average, bald eagles are large, skilled hunters.

"Their grip is tremendously strong, with a ratcheting mechanism in their feet that allows them to successfully hold onto something without constantly using the muscles," Bittner says, going on to describe one of his most memorable bald eagle experiences in Alaska, when a bald eagle swooped down near his boat and grabbed a salmon so large it could hardly fly. The eagle swam with it until it reached the shore, where it was finally able to eat the fish.

Bittner says that residents may be more likely to see eagle activity during this time of year, as courtship flights are occurring. The eagles start to hang around their nests in November and December, and begin to lay eggs in January. Peak activity runs from late December to mid-February, slowing down once the eggs have been laid.

While these hunters have few predators, they do share the skies with another stunning member of the eagle family — the golden eagle.

The golden eagle is a longtime inhabitant of Southern California, and there are currently 46 pairs in the area.

Oftentimes, juvenile bald eagles are mistaken for golden eagles or osprey because of their coloration. Bittner says that for the first two years of their lives, they look a lot like goldens, because their heads are black. The color gradually fades around three years of age, with their heads reaching the iconic, fully white, "bald" look they are known for around at four or five years of

age.

As a result, Bittner says, "We get a lot of reports of golden eagles feeding around reservoirs, but it is normally a juvenile bald eagle."

Bald eagles have an impressive lifespan, potentially reaching 40 to 45 years of age in captivity, and upwards of 30 years in the wild.

"They have to be very agile and alert, almost like constantly being an Olympic athlete, in order to survive," he says.

They are a sight not frequently seen, and residents may be wondering where to catch a glimpse of one of these magnificent beauties. And they're in luck, because one of the best places is right in Ramona at the Ramona Grasslands County Preserve, off Rangeland Road. Bittner adds that they can sometimes be seen near Lake Jennings, Lake Henshaw and occasionally hunting around Lake Poway.

So, the next time you see an eagle soaring overhead, pause for a moment and remember the plight they endured to get here — and enjoy the moment!

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