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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Golden Eagle

Aquila chrysaetos



Photograph [by Jim Crotty \(Flickr\)](#)

By Jennifer Chow

The golden eagle is the largest bird-of-prey in North America, and one of only two eagle species in Canada along with the bald eagle. They are graceful, powerful, swift and agile raptors. Some regard the golden eagle as one of the most formidable birds on Earth. Sightings of this beautiful raptor are rare, but always exciting and memorable. Golden eagles are symbols of freedom and majesty throughout their range.

NWPS Headquarters
720-1190 Melville Street
Vancouver, BC V6E 3W1

NWPS Vancouver Island
PO Box 39058
RPO James Bay
Victoria, BC V8V 4X8

t Vancouver 604.568.9160
t Victoria 778.967.3379
e info@northwestwildlife.com
w www.northwestwildlife.com

Characteristics

Golden Eagles are dark brown with golden-brown feathers on their head and necks, giving them their namesake; with yellow feet, black claws and beak, and feathers going all the way down to the toes, they are truly an impressive sight. They are large birds measuring 70 to 84cm (28 to 33 inches) in height with a 210 cm (84 in) wingspan.

Females are typically larger than males, with females weighing 5 kg (11 lbs) and males slightly less. Other than the size difference, males and females look alike. Their feathers actually weigh more than their bones and golden eagles can have around 7,000 feathers!

Very young chicks are covered in a white down, with dark feathers as they grow in. Young golden eagles have defined white patches at the tail base and in the wings for the first few years.

Golden eagles can look similar in colouring to some hawks, but are much larger than them. They can also be confused often with juvenile bald eagles which are dark brown with white mottling and no golden feathers. The two species are often found in differing habitats as well with bald eagles favouring riverine related habitats and golden eagles, mountainous and sub-alpine areas.

Life Cycle

The male golden eagle tries to attract a mate with aerial manoeuvres. In courtship, pairs of golden eagles may perform “dances” in the sky with careful series of swoops and dives, flying in unison and play attacks and chasing. Golden eagle pairs may stay together for several years or sometimes even for life.

They are 4-5 years old when they are ready to mate but usually fly around over a large range for the first year before breeding. They breed from March to August, depending on the location.

They prefer to nest in cliffs but will also nest in trees. They start building their nest 1-3 months before laying their eggs and may tend to their nest year-round. Their nests are large, on average 1.5-1.8 m (5-6 feet) or larger and they may return to reuse the nest annually.

Golden eagles lay an average of 2 eggs per season, but can lay anywhere from 1-4 eggs. These eggs are usually white-cream with brown speckles and take 35 to 45 days to hatch, with the chicks hatching several days apart from each other. The female incubates the eggs and when hatched, both parents feed the young with the male bringing most of the food.

Baby golden eagles are called “eaglets” or “chicks”. Because they hatch days apart, the older eaglets are often significantly older and bigger. It is not un-common for the bigger and stronger eaglets to kill the smaller babies. They learn to fly at 10 weeks old, at which point they are “fledglings” and are independent after 40 to 80 days.

Golden eagles can live for around 30 years in the wild and have lived up to age 46 in captivity.

Habitat

Golden Eagles live in prairies and mountainous regions, where there are open areas. They tend to avoid large sections of uninterrupted forest and urban areas. They tend to nest in cliffs or in other typically high area. Thus, they tend to live in rugged, remote areas and tend to stay away from population centres. However, golden eagles have a very wide range in North America, ranging from arctic to desert, grasslands to farmland, forests to alpine. They can have large territories up to 155 square km (60 square miles).

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Golden eagles, unlike bald eagles, are found in North America as well as Europe, Asia and even north Africa. There is one species with at least 6 subspecies, which differ in size, colour and range.

Behaviour

Golden eagles are carnivorous and get most of their food by hunting, both in flight and from perches. Sometimes they hunt in pairs or by themselves. As they tend to live in open areas, their primary prey tends to be small animals that live on the prairies, or the sub-alpine environments. Their primary prey species is black-tailed jackrabbit. In addition, they eat mostly small mammals such as ground squirrels, pikas and marmots. Since they have a varied range, they can also have a varied diet and will occasionally take down larger prey such as deer, young bighorn sheep and Dall's sheep, coyotes, red fox, bobcats and weasels. They will also eat reptiles and other birds.

In addition to hunting, they will also scavenge for meat and steal food from other birds and nests.

Golden eagles can be solitary animals or will sometimes stay with their mate year-round, depending where they live but do not typically live in groups.

With large territories, golden eagles are superb flyers with great agility and swiftness despite their large size. They can also soar for hours on thermals rising up from high cliffs.

They often will dive in the air at very fast speeds and have been clocked at nearly 320 km/hr (per hour (200 miles/hr). In level flight, golden eagles can fly at 125 Km/hr (80 mph) but they average at 48 Km/hr (30 mph) in flight. They glide at the edges of their territory to visually mark them.

Golden eagles are fairly quiet, aside from breeding season. Their calls are tend to be weak, whistled vocalizations.

Some golden eagles, mostly in northern areas such as northern Canada and Alaska may migrate south, while others that live in milder climates often do not and will stay in their home ranges year round.

Threats

Adult golden eagles have no natural predators.

Golden eagles are considered *threatened* in British Columbia and are protected under law.

Worldwide they are considered "*Least Concern*" due to their extremely wide range; however, some local populations such as those in Ontario are listed as *endangered*.

However, poaching/hunting are still major threats. Although hunting is illegal in most areas in the US and Canada, poachers still hunt them for their feathers and talons. Furthermore, shooting, trapping, nest disturbance and poisoning are other human-related threats.

Previously, it was thought that golden eagles were hunting livestock and as a result, many were killed prior to laws to protect them. Although physically capable of doing so, golden eagles rarely hunt livestock. However, the perception that they may kill livestock or have before, can lead to conflicts with farmers.

As golden eagles fly and usually live in open areas, they can collide into power lines, windmills and be injured by other tall man-made structures in the open. They can also be inadvertently poisoned with lead shots that hunters use.

As with all most wildlife, golden eagles primary threat comes from loss of habitat.

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What We Can Do To Help

- Do not use poisons in the household or in the environment as these can have a detrimental effect on wildlife, especially top predators such as eagles.
- Get involved with organizations such as Northwest Wildlife Preservation Society and the Orphan Wildlife Rehabilitation Society (OWL) in the lower mainland, BC.
- Educate others to the importance of wildlife especially keystone species like golden eagles.
- Participate in habitat clean-ups and restoration projects.

Other Interesting Facts

Reflecting the diversity of their range, Golden Eagles are in the emblems of several countries on multiple continents in Europe, Middle East, Asia and North America. They are national symbols of Austria, Egypt, Germany, Ghana, Iraq, Kazakhstan, Mexico, Romania and Yeman.

In the Eurasian steeps, the Kazah people hunt with trained golden eagles while riding horseback.

Golden eagles are among the strongest of all raptors. They have powerful flight muscles with well-developed pectorals

Golden eagle's vision is so acute that they can easily spot prey 2 kilometres in the sky.

Golden eagles, like most birds have three eyelids; top and bottom and a third eyelid (the nictitating membrane) used to clean and protect the eyeball.

Golden eagles have light-weight but strong bones that are not quite hollow but have a strut-like honeycomb structure.

Golden and bald eagles and the only two eagle species in Canada. There are over 60 different species of eagles worldwide.

Golden eagles have over 7,000 feathers for powered flight and for warmth in cold climates.

Where & When to view the animal.

Golden eagles are often found in remote areas and high in the air, making it somewhat difficult to view the animal in the wild. They are not typically spotted in the lower mainland.

Some of the northern parks with pristine alpine ecosystems are ideal for golden eagles. In addition, at Mount Baker, close to the BC-Washington border, golden eagles can be observed.

“Birds in Motion” on Grouse Mountain in the summer season has a captive golden eagle for flight demonstrations.

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The Orphan Wildlife Rehabilitation Society (OWL) in Delta, BC has a few captive golden eagles as permanent residents.

Bibliography

All About Birds (The Cornell Lab of Ornithology) :Golden Eagle - simple navigation, clear, basic information about the Golden Eagle. Includes identification guide with photos, sound and range map.

http://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Golden_Eagle/id

BioKids: Golden Eagle – More detailed overview

http://www.biokids.umich.edu/critters/Aquila_chrysaetos/

BC Species and Ecosystems Explorer – conservation and basic information on many animals, plants and ecosystems in British Columbia, including the Golden Eagle

<http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/atrisk/toolintro.html>

In Ontario, the Golden Eagle is endangered

<http://www.ontario.ca/environment-and-energy/golden-eagle>

Hawk Mountain: Golden Eagle – focused on Hawk Mountain but a good overview including videos and graphs

<http://www.hawkmountain.org/raptorpedia/hawks-at-hawk-mountain/hawk-species-at-hawk-mountain/golden-eagle/page.aspx?id=646>

Wikipedia: Golden Eagle - extensive overview but can be hard to read and navigate

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_eagle

Peregrine Fund: Golden Eagle: Good info on past and present threats

http://www.peregrinefund.org/explore-raptors-species/Golden_Eagle#sthash.Op1TrJuf.rXTZa0yI.dpbs

National Geographic: Golden Eagle – basic information

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/birds/golden-eagle/>

The Mating Behaviors of Golden Eagles – description of the “dance in the air”

<http://animals.pawnation.com/mating-behaviors-golden-eagle-11151.html>

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