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### **OutdoorsVT: Eagle watch Majestic bird becomes more common in Vt.**

By [Darren Marcy](#)

It wasn't all that long ago that seeing a bald eagle in Vermont was an extremely rare treat. Today, while far from a regular occurrence, the chance of seeing what many consider the most majestic bird flying is a real possibility as bald eagles have been making a return to the state.

Part of that is because Vermont is surrounded by states — and Canada — that are loaded with eagles.

But the increase in eagle numbers is also a direct result of a concerted effort by state and federal agencies, conservation groups and corporate partners working together to help the grand birds to repopulate the Green Mountain State.

Several hundred years ago, there may have been as many as a half million bald eagles in what is now the continental United States.

But their population plummeted around the turn of the 20th century, largely due to human activity that destroyed habitat as well as feather collection, bounties and a reduction in game on which eagles fed.

But no single impact harmed bald eagle population numbers like the use of the insecticide DDT, which was banned in 1972.

DDT caused the bald eagles to produce eggs with thin shells, which would crack when sat on by the adults. By the early 1960s, there were fewer than 100 bald eagles in the northeastern United States.

"The big reason eagles are coming back nationwide is stopping the use of DDT," said Lilla Lumbra, outreach coordinator for the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. "That's really what turned around their comeback."

The birds were put on the federal endangered species list in 1967.

Protections afforded by the Endangered Species Act, as well as the DDT ban, sent the birds' on the path of a slow rebound, which was completed Aug. 9, 2007, when the bald eagle was removed from the list of threatened and endangered species.

But while the bald eagle prospered throughout the country, Vermont's eagle population lagged.

That led to the forming of the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative, which is a collaborative project aimed at establishing a breeding population in Vermont.

Funded with federal money, thanks to former Sen. James Jeffords, the joint effort features the Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, National Wildlife Federation, Outreach for Earth Stewardship and Central Vermont Public Service.

The goal of the program is to remove the birds from the state's endangered species list.

Beginning in 2004, the restoration effort began releasing chicks into the wild and 29 bald eagles were reintroduced over three years into Vermont.

Between the released birds and those that have crossed into Vermont from surrounding states and Canada, more and more bald eagles have been seen perched in trees and soaring above the state's waters.

Last winter, a record 30 bald eagles were spotted during the Midwinter Bald Eagle Survey, continuing an upward trend seen over the last three decades.

From 1979 to 1989, an average of two eagles was seen per year, followed by an average of just more than nine eagles over the subsequent decade. From 2001 to 2006, there was an average of 15 birds counted per year.

"They're all over Vermont now," Lumbra said. "(There are) sightings all over the state. They tend to congregate wherever there's a food supply."

The majority of the eagles counted in this year's survey were spotted on Lake Champlain between the Champlain Bridge and islands, with the highest concentration being found between the Champlain Bridge and Charlotte Ferry.

Even as the numbers grow year by year and bald eagles are seen throughout Vermont, there are even higher hopes for the future.

With the reintroduction effort now five years old, some of those released birds are reaching maturity, which happens after about four to five years, and it's hoped that, within a couple of years, the restoration initiative will begin to see those birds start to nest and create their own offspring.

"We banded those birds and we're looking to see if any of those come back," Lumbra said.

Lumbra said they witnessed a couple of pairs showing signs of nesting behavior, such as becoming territorial, but it often takes several years of "practice" nesting before they actually nest.

That would be a boon to the recovery effort in the state because eagles tend to stay in the area where they fledge, Lumbra said, and Champlain is a big body of water, with open water in the winter, and is a good food source.

While Vermont has had nesting bald eagles before, the last two springs offered a big step forward.

Last year, the first successful nesting to result in a fledged eagle in many decades was witnessed. This year, there were two.

All three, however, have been on the eastern side of the state along the Connecticut River. To get eagles successfully nesting in the Champlain Valley would add to the diversity of the Vermont eagle recovery program.

Until recently, Vermont was the only state in the lower 48 states without breeding bald eagles.

There is work to be done to continue the population growth and work toward getting the bald eagle off the state endangered species list and the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative can use your help.

Report sightings of bald eagles to [director@ofes.org](mailto:director@ofes.org). If the bird has a metal leg band and you have a spotting scope or can record the number, that information will help.

Also, don't approach nesting eagles. If you accidentally get too close to a nest — sometimes resulting in the eagle calling out — back away slowly and circle wide around the nest site. Nests that are disturbed too often may be abandoned.

If you see an eagle that seems to be in trouble, call 324-4111, or contact your local game warden.

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