

Bald eagle is coming off endangered list after decades of protection

by Terry Rodgers - CNS

SANTA CATALINA ISLAND, Calif. - Without a safety harness, wildlife biologist Peter B. Sharpe scales a steep crag to clamp ID bands on three bald eaglets as their screeching parents go into dive-bomb mode.

He tries not to think about a similar encounter a few weeks earlier, when an eagle protecting its nest struck him with its talons, bloodying his face.

Despite its aggressive defense, the distress call of America's national bird is surprisingly feeble.

Nearly wiped out in the lower 48 states four decades ago, bald eagles today can be found in every state except Hawaii, which lies outside the species' range.

FLYING FREE AGAIN - Bald eagles once were "something you would dream about seeing," as one expert put it, after a pesticide decimated populations decades ago. Their numbers have rebounded in places such as Santa Catalina Island as a result of breeding efforts. CNS Photo by Sean M. Haffey. The birds' resurgence has been based on perseverance and collaboration among government agencies and dozens of grass-roots organizations.

"This is a great conservation success story, one that shows the Endangered Species Act really works," said Mike Daulton, director of conservation for the National Audubon Society.

Eight years after the federal government first proposed removing the bald eagle from the endangered species list, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service is expected to make it official.

State and federal laws would still protect the bird, but federal officials are proposing a permit process that would allow developers and private property owners who meet stringent conditions to remove its nests.

In addition, a federal team will monitor the species' status for five years.

"As their populations increase, (the birds) are becoming a lot more adaptable," said Suzanne Audet, a federal biologist in Spokane, Wash., who will head the team.

But as the eagle population expands, so will conflicts concerning property rights.

"Bald eagles use habitat - shorelines and waterfront - that the American public likes to develop," Audet said.

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