

# Bald Eagles

## *in the San Bernardino Mountains*

By Denis Thomas

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Water has always been a huge attraction for both people and animals. Before the creation of Big Bear Lake in 1884, very few people or bald eagles ventured into these mountains. Today, the lakes in the San Bernardino mountains support the largest wintering bald eagle population in Southern California. Fleeing their frozen northern homes with dwindling winter food supplies, bald eagles arrive in November and stay until early April. Our mountain lakes like rarely freeze completely, providing eagles with a tasty winter buffet of fish and waterfowl.

Over the past 20 years, the population has fluctuated from lows of 10-20 to highs of 35-40.

In 1992, the Forest Service biologists started a research project to learn more about what areas of the San Bernardino National forest are important for eagle foraging perching, and night roosting. Biologists caught 15 eagles and equipped them with tiny radio-transmitters that allowed their movements to be tracked. Through radio-tracking, they learned that some of the same individual eagles return to the San Bernardino Mountains year after year. They also determined that there is a lot of movement of eagles between the different mountain lakes and that the lakes do not have distinctive separate populations. It was interesting to find



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that some of the eagles travel to Montana, Wyoming, and Idaho for nesting. Scientists at Lake Silverwood have equipped some bald eagles with transmitters tracked by satellites. Some of the birds were tracked as far north as the Great Slave Lake in the Yukon Territory, over 2,000 miles away!

The bald eagle was near extinction in the 1960's when only 500 nesting pairs could be found in the lower 48 states, but has made a remarkable comeback. Through Endangered Species protection, captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts, the banning of DDT, and public education these magnificent birds have recovered. Today, the estimated bald eagle population in the lower 48 is probably near 10,000 birds!

Catching a glimpse of our national bird is relatively easy during the winter months. Just look in the tallest trees around the lakeshore. If the lake is partially frozen, look for eagles on the ice near small groups of ducks using open water pockets. When viewing eagles, make sure not to be too loud so as not to disturb or distract them from hunting. If you would prefer a guided eagle tour, call or stop by the Big Bear Discovery Center to reserve a spot on a 3 hour Eagle Discovery Tour. With slides, binoculars, and spotting scopes you will learn everything you ever wanted to know about eagles and are almost guaranteed to see one in the wild.

