

# THE RETURN OF BALD EAGLES (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) AS BREEDING BIRDS TO LONG ISLAND, NEW YORK

**Bob Grover (corresponding author)**

Director of Environmental Sciences, GPI, Babylon, NY  
rgrover@gpinet.com

**MaryLaura Lamont**

Park Ranger, William Floyd Estate, Fire Island National Seashore  
Woodpink59@gmail.com

**Mike Scheibel**

Natural Resource Manager, Mashomack Preserve, The Nature  
Conservancy  
mscheibel49@gmail.com

The recent return of the majestic Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) as a breeding bird to Long Island after ~75 years absence has generated great excitement both among the birding community and in the news media. This article examines the history of Bald Eagles nesting on Long Island, their disappearance, and, after a long hiatus, their recent return.

Long Island's documented ornithological history is unusually long and detailed. This wealth of knowledge is probably partly due to the island's distinctive geography and ecology, but it is certainly also a consequence of the island's location near New York City. Home to generations of biologists, research centers such as the venerable American Museum of Natural History, and birding hotspots such as Central Park, New York City is an epicenter of North American ornithology and has accumulated a vast historical database of avian species occurrence going back well over a century. A detailed history of the Bald Eagle's status on Long Island can be traced through this database.

\*\*\*\*\*

The oldest reference we could locate regarding the breeding of Bald Eagles on Long Island is in *The Birds of Long Island*, authored by J. P. Giraud in 1844. Giraud observed that Bald Eagles were "quite abundant" on Long Island in winter, with "60 to 70 shot in one season" (gasp!). He also noted that he "never observed a nest on Long Island", but, of course, the island still had vast wild areas with little access in 1844. Bull (1964) wrote that it "undoubtedly bred" in remote areas of Long Island and elsewhere from the 1870s to the 1890s, but that there was little information available.

Chapman, in his 1906 *The Birds of the Vicinity of New York City*, stated that Bald Eagles were “rather rare but breed in several locations.” This work pertained not exclusively to Long Island, but also to the greater metropolitan area, the Lower Hudson River Valley, and northern New Jersey, and does not specifically parse out the birds’ status on Long Island. Eaton (1914) wrote that the Bald Eagle “formerly nested in many places along the shores of Long Island” but that persecution caused the abandonment of the majority of these sites. Griscom’s *Birds of the New York City Region* in 1923 (pertaining to roughly the same areas as Chapman), observed generally that eagles were locally common in summer but nesting was not confirmed, yet made a specific reference to Mastic, Long Island, stating they were a fairly common summer resident there, and “may breed.”

Cruickshank, in his *Birds Around New York City* (1942), specifically observed that Bald Eagles bred on Gardiners Island “until 1930.” The literature is sparse over the next few decades, until Bull’s landmark *Birds of the New York Area* was published in 1964. Bull added the observation that Bald Eagles were common on Long Island in the winter until the 1930s, and reiterated Cruickshank’s observation that they bred on Gardiners Island until the 1930s.

The decline of Bald Eagles throughout New York State as a result of habitat loss, human interference, and illegal shooting had already reduced the population to fewer than 20 pairs by the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, and, after World War II, the use of the pesticide DDT brought them to near extirpation. By 1960, nesting activity had ceased at most of the known locations, and by 1970, there remained only a single, unsuccessful pair at Hemlock Lake, near Rochester. With the enactment of federal legislation and a growing conservation movement, the birds finally began a slow recovery.

As is typical of the *Accipitridae*, Bald Eagles are not possessed of great fecundity, for which they compensate by long life span and a relatively long period of parental care. Nevertheless, the sharp curtailment in illegal hunting and the nationwide ban on DDT in 1972 was not enough to facilitate their recovery without intervention. Fortunately, the State implemented a successful reintroduction program in 1976, a cooperative effort by the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), and Cornell University, to aid in the species’ recovery.

New York’s Bald Eagle Restoration Project undertook an unprecedented goal—to bring back a breeding population of eagles to New York by importing young birds from other states and hand rearing them to independence, a process known as “hacking”. As stated in the draft 2015 NYSDEC Conservation Plan for Bald Eagles in NYS (Town 2015), between 1976 and 1988 biologists collected 198 nestling bald eagles, most of them from Alaska. They transported the eaglets to suitable habitats in New York, provided food while the birds became accustomed to their new environment, and released them when they were able to fly. The hacked eagles thrived, returning to New York to nest and

breed. By 1988, the hacking project had reached its goal of establishing 10 breeding pairs, and was ended. The population continued to grow, and in 2007 Bald Eagles were removed from the list of threatened and endangered species. In 2014, 254 pairs in 331 tracked territories were occupying nests. The eagles' decline and subsequent slow recovery has been well chronicled by many investigators and nicely summarized by Peter Nye, himself an instrumental figure in the recovery effort, in Levine (1998) and McGowan and Corwin (2008). A comprehensive report is found in Town (2015).

Despite successful reintroduction in the rest of the State, Bald Eagles remained absent on Long Island. Two relatively recent comprehensive surveys, published in *The Atlas of Breeding Birds in New York State* (1988), and *The Second Atlas of the Breeding Birds in New York State* (2008), found no Long Island breeding records of Bald Eagles in the periods covered, 1980-1985 and 2000-2005, respectively.

In 2006, the first Bald Eagle nest on Long Island since the 1930s was discovered on Gardiners Island by MaryLaura Lamont (MLL). Since that time several more nest sites have been confirmed as well. Mike Scheibel (MS) has been compiling records of Bald Eagle activity on Long Island from 2006 to the present, in his capacity as a wildlife biologist for NYSDEC and, more recently, The Nature Conservancy. These records document recent nesting activity at five aeries, all in Suffolk County: 1) Gardiners Island, Town of East Hampton; 2) Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge, Shirley, Town of Brookhaven 3) Mashomack Preserve, Town of Shelter Island, 4) Bayard Cutting Arboretum, Great River, Town of Islip; and 5) William Floyd Estate, Mastic Beach, Town of Brookhaven. Other suspected locations include Northern Nassau County (Mill Cove, Oyster Bay, Laurel Hollow), Town of Oyster Bay, and the Peconic River area, Town of Riverhead. Details on these sightings are as follows.

\*\*\*\*\*

Following approximately seventy-five years absence as a breeding species in this region, Bald Eagles were found near a nest on the north end of Gardiners Island in 2006. This discovery was made on 16 December when MLL, participating in the Montauk Christmas Bird Count on this privately-owned island, noted a large stick nest in a live red oak, set back in the oak forest near Bostwick Pond. Two immature-plumaged eagles were observed interacting near the nest site. MLL suspected it might be an eagle's nest but was unable to confirm it that day.

Access to the island is restricted, dependent on the presence of the landowners and the clemency of sea conditions. No access was possible for the Christmas Bird Counts from 2007-2009, but returning to the island in 2010, MLL again detected the large stick nest from some distance. Again, time constraints prevented her from inspecting it at closer range. In 2011, she finally examined the nest closely, and confirmed it was indeed a Bald Eagle nest. One

immature and two adult eagles were in the vicinity, the adult female actively harassing the observer. A second immature bird was found later at a nearby location (Lamont 2012, 2014). The eagles were observed around the nest site again during the Christmas Bird Counts in 2012 and 2013, and nesting activity was reportedly observed earlier in these seasons. On 27 June, 2014, MS confirmed active nesting at this site when he observed a single juvenile-plumaged eaglet in the nest. This site likely remained active through the 2015 season, but no further information is available.

At Wertheim National Wildlife Refuge, on the Carmans River, a visiting kayaker or canoeist reported a possible eagle's nest to refuge staff in the spring of 2013. The nest, located in a live pitch pine, was later confirmed, but productivity was uncertain. Nevertheless, an immature eagle was seen with an adult during the fall and winter of 2013. In 2014, nesting success was again uncertain, but 1-2 immatures were seen with an adult in the fall of 2014. In 2015 nesting success was confirmed, with the presence of a juvenile-plumaged bird near the nest site.

At the Mashomack Preserve on Shelter Island, a nest in a live black oak was originally observed by MS in January 2014, and on 5 March, it was occupied by an incubating adult eagle. On 21 April, one eaglet was seen in the nest, and on 10 June, two young (aged ~62 days) were observed flapping in the nest. On 3 July two fledglings were seen flying over nearby Gibson Beach in the company of both adults. In 2015, three young were fledged on or about 1 July from this nest. See Figures 1 and 2, pp. 309-310.

In 2015, at the Bayard Cutting Arboretum in Great River, a 3-4 year old and an adult eagle appeared to be usurping an old Osprey nest in a live pitch pine, as first reported by John Gluth in mid-March. He later observed the male carrying sticks to the nest. Subsequently, there were interactions between the eagles and Ospreys in the area, and, while breeding was apparently unsuccessful, the eagles are back in the vicinity as we go to press. These may well be the same birds observed in spring of 2015 and sporadically throughout the following winter at Connetquot River State Park, immediately to the north.

The return of Bald Eagles to the William Floyd Estate after a long absence there was also discovered by MLL, in 2015. The estate, now a separate operating unit of the National Park Service's Fire Island National Seashore, was home to the famous naturalist John Treadwell Nichols (1883-1958), who married Cornelia Floyd in 1910. He is said to have written about eagles nesting on the property. The nest is known to have been there in the 1920s and possibly the 1930s, after which the eagles disappeared, as did all the others on Long Island and across most of the country.

In November 2014 MLL observed a female Bald Eagle on the estate. The bird remained all winter, and in February 2015, was being courted by a male. What made this nesting all the more unusual was that the female was a third year bird; her mate was a full adult (Fig. 3, p. 310). On 21 March the female was found incubating in the nest. Judging by the actions of both parents, it appeared

that an egg or eggs had hatched around 20-21 April. By 27 April the parents were repeatedly observed feeding their eaglet(s). On 2 May a single fluffy, white, head could be seen bobbling within the nest (Fig. 4, p. 311). By 21 May, the eaglet had molted into all-black plumage, except for two white, downy feathers sticking out of the top of its head. By 9 June the eaglet was flapping its wings and by 19 June it was half the size of its mother. Despite her inexperience, the mother successfully fledged her eaglet on 13 July (Fig. 5, p. 311). All three stayed in the area until the end of July.

In addition to these confirmed nesting attempts, two suspected attempts were reported to MS in recent years. In Northern Nassau County, eagles were sighted during the 2012 breeding season in Mill Cove, Oyster Bay and Laurel Hollow, likely involving the same birds. These reports were supplemented by photos of two adults perched during July of 2012 in Laurel Hollow. Along the Peconic River, numerous sightings were reported from around the village of Riverhead in 2015, including one of a bird carrying nesting material in the Flanders area.

\*\*\*\*\*

The return of breeding Bald Eagles to Long Island is a part of the on-going recovery of the species in New York State. The cooperative effort by NYSDEC, USFWS, and Cornell University, coupled with the nationwide ban on DDT, proved to be one of the most successful conservation stories of our time. Long Island, with its still-plentiful woodland, river, and coastline habitats, is a natural place for this population to expand.

Even as of this writing, reports of eagle sightings, many with photos, are pouring in to local listservs, regional compilers, the eBird database, and birding websites across Long Island. With this ongoing, steady increase in observations, we anticipate that additional nestings will be attempted in the spring of 2016.

What a wonderful addition to the “birdscape” of Long Island.

## LITERATURE CITED

- Andrle, Janet R. *The Atlas of Breeding birds in New York State*. Eds. Andrle, Robert. F., Janet. R. Carroll. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988. pp. 100-101.
- Bull, John. *Birds of the New York Area*. New York: Harper and Row, 1964. pp. 157-158.
- Chapman, Frank M. *The Birds of the Vicinity of New York*. Guide leaflet 22. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1906.
- Cruickshank, Allan D. *Birds Around New York City*. Handbook series. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1942. pp. 140-141.

- Eaton, Elon Howard. *Birds of New York*. Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1914. pp. 91-94.
- Giraud, Jacob P., Jr. *Birds of Long Island*. New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1844. pp. 9-10.
- Griscom, Ludlow. *Birds of the New York City Region*. New York: American Museum of Natural History, 1923. pp 193-195.
- Lamont, Mary Laura. "The Continuation of the Story of Fighting Eagle Creek, Gardiner's Island". *The Osprey*, Eastern Long Island Audubon Society newsletter Vol. XXXVII No. 2. 2012.
- Lamont, MaryLaura. "Notes on Bald Eagles nesting on Gardiner's Island, East Hampton, New York". *The Kingbird*. Vol. 63, No. 4. 2014. pp. 289-290.
- Nye, Peter G. *Bull's Birds of New York State*. Ed. Emanuel Levine. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998. pp. 182-185.
- Nye, Peter G. *The Second Atlas of the Breeding Birds in New York State*. Eds. McGowan, Kevin J. and Kimberly Corwin. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. pp. 188-189.
- Town, Blanche E., lead author. "Conservation Plan for Bald Eagles in New York State (Draft)." New York Department of Environmental Conservation. January 2015. Accessed 12 Apr 2016.  
[http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife\\_pdf/baeaplan1214draft.pdf](http://www.dec.ny.gov/docs/wildlife_pdf/baeaplan1214draft.pdf)



## PHOTO GALLERY SUMMER 2015



Bald Eagles have returned to Long Island as a breeding species, as detailed in an article on pp. 274-279.

Fig. 1. Juvenile Bald Eagle at Mashomack Preserve, *Suffolk*, 29 July 2015, © Jim Colligan.



Bald Eagles on Long Island (pp. 274-279).

Fig. 2 (top): Mashomack Preserve, *Suffolk*, 28 Jul 2015, © Jim Colligan.

Fig. 3 (bottom): William Floyd Estate, *Suffolk*, 26 Apr 2015, © Steve Schwarz.



Fig. 4 (top): Female with chick, William Floyd Estate, *Suffolk*, 7 May 2016, © Steve Schwarz.

Fig. 5 (bottom): Fledged eaglet looking at the moon, William Floyd Estate, *Suffolk*, 2 Aug 2016, © Steve Schwarz.