

A comprehensive study of the complex wanderings of Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem (GYE) bald eagles is described in the spring 1994 edition of **Yellowstone Science**. Researcher Al Harmata's account of the near 15-year project discusses project growth from the initial leg-banding scheme to the more effective, but more expensive, radio-tracking methods used in the mid- to late-1980s. Yellowstone was once thought to be a "black hole" for bald eagles (a location where their population was declining and even "sucking in" recruits from outside the Yellowstone area), but Harmata's research demonstrated just the opposite.

Both the leg-banding and radio-tracking experiments indicated that juvenile and immature GYE-born eagles wander westward (rather than the common north or south movements in most areas) early in the fall and often winter from southern California to Washington. The young birds returned to their birth nest areas in and around the park usually in April or May before they dispersed throughout the ecosystem, and beyond, to live their lives and breed. Harmata shows that the GYE eagle population (while perhaps low in productivity by some comparisons) has a very high survival rate for young eagles and that this is significant in supplying recruits to expanding eagle populations outside the GYE.

The researchers also noticed that the summer wanderings of the Yellowstone eagles nicely delineate the boundaries of the GYE. As an indicator of ecosystem health, eagles in the GYE now appear to be successful and the knowledge gained about the biological "boundaries" of this ecosystem as discovered in this research project give an even stronger basis for the ecosystem's protection.

Harmata and his colleagues conclude with resounding confidence that the GYE eagles are not disappearing in Yellowstone, but are rather bolstering the comeback of our national symbol in surrounding areas.