



2012 BALD EAGLE MONITORING

Annual Progress Report



January 2013

Title page photograph – screen grab from digital video: subadult bald eagle perched in old growth redwood tree, mouth of McArthur Creek at Redwood Creek, Redwood National Park, 8 January 2013.

INTRODUCTION

The bald eagle, (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), was taken off the list of species protected by the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in July, 2007 (USDI 2007). Bald eagles were originally listed as endangered in 1967, but due to a rising population trend, it was de-listed five years ago. Despite being de-listed, provisions within the ESA and other state and federal laws mandate continuing monitoring and protection of bald eagles within Redwood National and State Parks (RNSP or parks). Section 4(g)1 of the federal ESA requires that a species be monitored for five years post de-listing to ensure that de-listing was warranted and that populations are sustainable. The bald eagle is still listed, and protected, by the state of California as threatened under the California Endangered Species Act. In addition, the federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940 (Eagle Act) (16 USC 668-668c) provides full protection almost equal to those protections formerly afforded by the federal ESA. The Eagle Act prohibits “take” of bald and golden eagles. Take is defined by the law as “pursue, shoot, shoot at, poison, wound, kill, capture, trap, collect, molest or disturb.” Disturb has been interpreted by the USFWS as “to agitate or bother a bald or golden eagle to a degree that causes, or is likely to cause, based on the best scientific information available, 1) injury to an eagle, 2) a decrease in its productivity, by substantially interfering with normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering behavior, or 3) nest abandonment, by substantially interfering with normal breeding, feeding, or sheltering behavior” (USFWS 2007). Due to the protected status of the bald eagle, RNSP continues to annually monitor known nest sites, and compiles and records all reported bald eagle sightings within RNSP.

SURVEY AREA / METHODS

The objectives, methods and primary survey areas of the RNSP bald eagle inventory and monitoring program are described in Appendix A of the 2001 RNSP bald eagle annual progress report (Holm 2001).

RESULTS

All survey work during 2012 was conducted from the ground, with no aerial or kayak/canoe surveys performed. Thirty bald eagle observations were reported during 2012. The majority of observations were along the Freshwater Lagoon/Spit – Redwood Creek mouth area of Redwood National Park and along Gold Bluffs Beach in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park. Eagle nest surveys occurred at the two known nest territories, both located in Redwood National Park; the first on the ridge to the south of the old South Operations Center (SOC) near Orick and the second along the main stem of Mill Creek. All other observations were incidental sightings reported by RNSP biologists or other RNSP staff.

The old SOC ridge territory was monitored *ad libetum* during corvid monitoring surveys conducted within the territory. No nest was found and no fledglings were seen within the territory, but the territory was obviously occupied based on the activity of adult bald eagles seen throughout the breeding season. It is unknown if young were or were not successfully fledged in 2012. This was the sixteenth year that this territory has been occupied; at least 15 eaglets are known to have fledged from this one territory. This territory's annual reproductive status is summarized in Table 1.

The main stem Mill Creek bald eagle territory was first surveyed on 26 June 2012 when a single juvenile bald eagle was seen in the nest found two years ago. The eaglet was again seen perched on a branch in a tree near the nest tree on 26 July 2012. 2012 was the tenth year that this territory has been occupied; at least 12 eaglets are known to have fledged from this one territory. The annual reproductive status of this territory is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Reproductive status of known bald eagle territories in Redwood National and State Parks.

Year	Number of Eaglets Fledged	
	Old SOC Ridge Territory	Main Stem Mill Creek Territory
1997	ND ¹	X ²
1998	ND ¹	X ²
1999	2	X ²
2000	1	X ²
2001	1	X ²
2002	2	X ²
2003	2	1
2004	1	DNN ³
2005	1	1
2006	DNN ³	1
2007	1(2?)	2
2008	2	2
2009	DNN ³	2
2010	ND ¹	1
2011	2	1
2012	ND	1

¹ Territory occupied but reproductive status not determined (ND).

² Territory did not exist or was unknown (X).

³ Territory occupied but did not nest (DNN).

Other bald eagle sightings include adult and subadult individuals seen near Freshwater Spit-Lagoon/Mussel Beach (8 sightings), near the Klamath River mouth (1 sighting), around False

Klamath Cove (2 sightings), along lower Redwood Creek (3 sightings) – all in Redwood National Park, and flying over Gold Bluffs Beach in Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park (11 sightings).

No wintering bald eagle surveys were conducted during 2012.

DISCUSSION

The old SOC ridge territory was again occupied in 2012. The actual nest was again not found and is still in an unknown location but is most likely near the historic trees previously occupied based on the activity of adult bald eagles in the area. This territory has been very productive in the last 13 years, producing 15 eaglets, despite being within 0.25 miles of the Orick 3 Hour Loop Horse Trail. The main stem Mill Creek territory was productive again this year, fledging an eaglet despite the nest tree being located near the Mill Creek Horse Loop Trail. The pair moved the nest to a new nest tree two years ago, but it is still near the trail. As stated in previous years' reports, nesting eagles could potentially be disturbed by visitors walking along either of the trails. Bald eagles, however, have shown some ability to habituate to minor disturbances on the ground (Fraser et al. 1985). It is unknown if visitors using either trail influenced the eagle pairs, but the fact that the nests have fledged eaglets during the last thirteen and nine separate breeding seasons, respectively, while the trails were open to hikers and equestrians, continues to be extremely encouraging. It continues to appear that trail closures intended to prevent disturbance to the two active bald eagle territories is unwarranted. It can be assumed after this many successful breeding seasons that both eagle pairs have become habituated to the presence of park visitors using trails near their nests.

Like most previous years, significant numbers of sightings of adult eagles were seen along Gold Bluffs Beach during the breeding season. It was previously conjectured that the high number of sightings along Gold Bluffs Beach might have been an indication that some nesting activity was occurring inland within Prairie Creek Redwoods State Park. The numerous other sightings of both subadult and adult birds during all times of the year throughout other parts of RNSP were also encouraging. Young, non-breeding eagles appear to continue to explore RNSP during the breeding season and may potentially establish territories within RNSP when they reach adulthood. The scattered sightings of adult eagles within RNSP during the breeding season are harder to interpret. Without individual markings, it is impossible to determine whether the adults seen are from the two known territories within RNSP, from unknown territories within RNSP, or from distant territories. Regardless, all the eagle activity within RNSP continues to indicate a general upward trend of the park's eagle population.

Nationally, the bald eagle has been taken off the federal endangered species list and thus is considered to be "recovered." RNSP was under an obligation to monitor the species up through 2012 under the federal Endangered Species Act; that obligation has been met. The species is still listed as threatened by the state of California and so the park is obligated to monitor the species' status under that law. Finally, the federal Eagle Act obligates RNSP to provide extensive protections for bald eagles in perpetuity. Suitable and efficient protection can only occur if

managers know where eagles are nesting and congregating; otherwise inefficient “blanket” protection measures would need to be instituted.

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LITERATURE CITED

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