



Bald Eagles: Another Cuyahoga Comeback

Two mature bald eagles.
Yellowstone National Park Photo.



A bald eagle in the Cuyahoga Valley.
Photo by Martin Trimmer.



Immature bald eagle,
US Fish and Wildlife Photo.



For several years, bald eagles have been routinely seen along the Cuyahoga River in Cuyahoga Valley National Park (CVNP), leading to the question, “Will they build a nest here?” In 2006, the answer became, “Yes.” Bald eagles are nesting in the Cuyahoga Valley for the first time in modern history. The nest is located in the blue heron colony (heronry) in Pinery Narrows. It can be viewed from the Towpath Trail 1/2 mile north of Station Road Bridge Trailhead. The eagles’ return to the Cuyahoga Valley and other places nationwide is a great success story, showing that our efforts to care for the environment can make a difference.

What Has Caused the Comeback of Eagles?

In 1975 bald eagles were close to extinction, with just four breeding pairs in Ohio. Today there are over 100 breeding pairs in the state, and bald eagles have made a tremendous comeback nationwide. Banning the pesticide DDT in 1972 and establishing strong protection efforts with Endangered Species Act in 1973 have played a major role in their comeback.

Ongoing efforts to improve water quality and preserve wetlands have transformed a badly polluted Cuyahoga River valley into an appealing area with expansive wooded swamplands, making CVNP an attractive place for the eagles to remain throughout the year.

Why Are Eagles Here?

The Cuyahoga Valley, with expansive wooded wetlands that are relatively isolated from frequent human contact and rebounding fish populations in the river, has become an ideal place for eagles to nest and remain throughout the year. The great blue heronry in the Pinery Narrows was not a surprising choice for the nest location. Eagles prefer tall trees and pre-existing nests which they can expand, both of

which are found in the heronry.

Bald eagles have been steadily increasing throughout the nation. In Ohio, the greatest concentration occurs along western Lake Erie near Sandusky, from where eagles have been spending to new areas. The nesting pair in the Cuyahoga Valley are the only nesting bald eagles in Cuyahoga County.

Identifying Bald Eagles

Seeing a bald eagle with its seven foot wing span soaring gracefully is truly memorable. Notice that flying eagles have a flat profile, a flight pattern unique to eagles.

Adult bald eagles are especially striking with bright white heads and tails that contrast sharply with their solid brown bodies. It takes

five to six years before the birds develop adult plumage.

Immature eagles lack the white head. Their coloring is uniformly dark brown with bright white on the underside of their wings close to their bodies. Males and females appear identical in all phases of development.

Adult bald eagle in flight.
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Photo.



Courtship and Nesting

There are few natural events as spectacular as a pair bald eagles engaged in courtship. This event occurs in the fall and resumes in late January when eagles perform amazing aerial displays. Once the pair have selected each other, they plunge through air in very high dives, locking their talons and breaking apart just when it looks as though they are going to crash to the ground. As outstanding as these displays are, it is believed that nest building is even more critical for establishing bonds. Bald eagles are monogamous and thought to mate for life.

The Pinery Narrows nest is an ideal location for bald eagles. It sits in the fork of large tree between 50 to 100 feet above ground and close to the Cuyahoga River where the eagles can find ample fish. The eagles used an existing heron nest, adding branches to make it three times the size of an average heron nest. An average eagle nest is three to five feet across, three to six feet deep, and lined with grass, moss, and sometimes cattails. A typical eagle nest weighs a ton.

Incubation and Rearing Young

After courtship and mating, which can last until mid- February to late March, eagles lay one to three (typically two) eggs approximately 36 hours apart to increase the chance that one of the eggs will hatch when environmental conditions are most favorable. The eggs are incubated for approximately 35 days. Eggs hatch over the span of a few days, typically in April or early May. Young eagles remain in the nest 10-12 weeks until July or early August. They will frequently return to the nesting site

to receive food from their parents for nearly two months after their first flight. Both parents share the tasks of incubation and rearing young.

Eagle eggs and young are extremely sensitive to cold temperatures, so adults must remain on the nest constantly. Human disturbance can disrupt this constant care, jeopardizing nesting success.

Finding Food and Taking Flight

As exciting as it is to see an eagle, it is even more thrilling to watch their skill at plucking a fish from open water. An eagle, with its incredible eye sight, can see a fish surfacing from up to two miles away, soar over the location, and then with ease grab its prey with four-inch talons. If the fish struggles, the eagle is equipped with tiny spikes on its toes to prevent the fish from escaping.

The Cuyahoga Valley eagles are known to forage between Canal Visitor Center and Bath Road along the Cuyahoga River. Bald eagles prefer to eat fish, but will also eat a variety of mammals and sometimes other birds. In the

winter, when food is limited, eagles typically scavenge for carrion.

Adult bald eagles in Ohio are typically non-migratory and remain close to their nesting area throughout the year. Immature birds migrate sporadically from October through March. Once they are mature enough to breed after three to four years, they usually nest within 100 miles from their parents. This behavior, and the continued recovery of the Cuyahoga River valley, suggests a bright future for bald eagles in Cuyahoga Valley National Park.

How Can I Help?

You can help protect Cuyahoga Valley's eagles by observing their nest in a way that minimizes disturbance. Nesting eagles are highly sensitive to human foot traffic, making it best to observe them quietly using binoculars or a spotting scope from more than 100 yards away. It is

imperative that you refrain from going closer to the nest by staying out of areas marked as closed. Disturbance distracts eagles from sitting on their eggs and can result in breeding failure or abandoning the area as a future nesting site.

Getting There

The nest is located in the blue heron colony (heronry) in Pinery Narrows. It can be viewed from the Towpath Trail 1/2 mile north of Station Road Bridge Trailhead. Station Road

Bridge Trailhead is located on Riverview Road, 1/8 mile south of State Route 82 in Brecksville, Ohio.

15610 Vaughn Road
Brecksville, Ohio 44141
(216) 524-1497 or (800) 445-9667
www.nps.gov/cuva or www.dayinthevalley.com



**Cuyahoga Valley
National Park**