

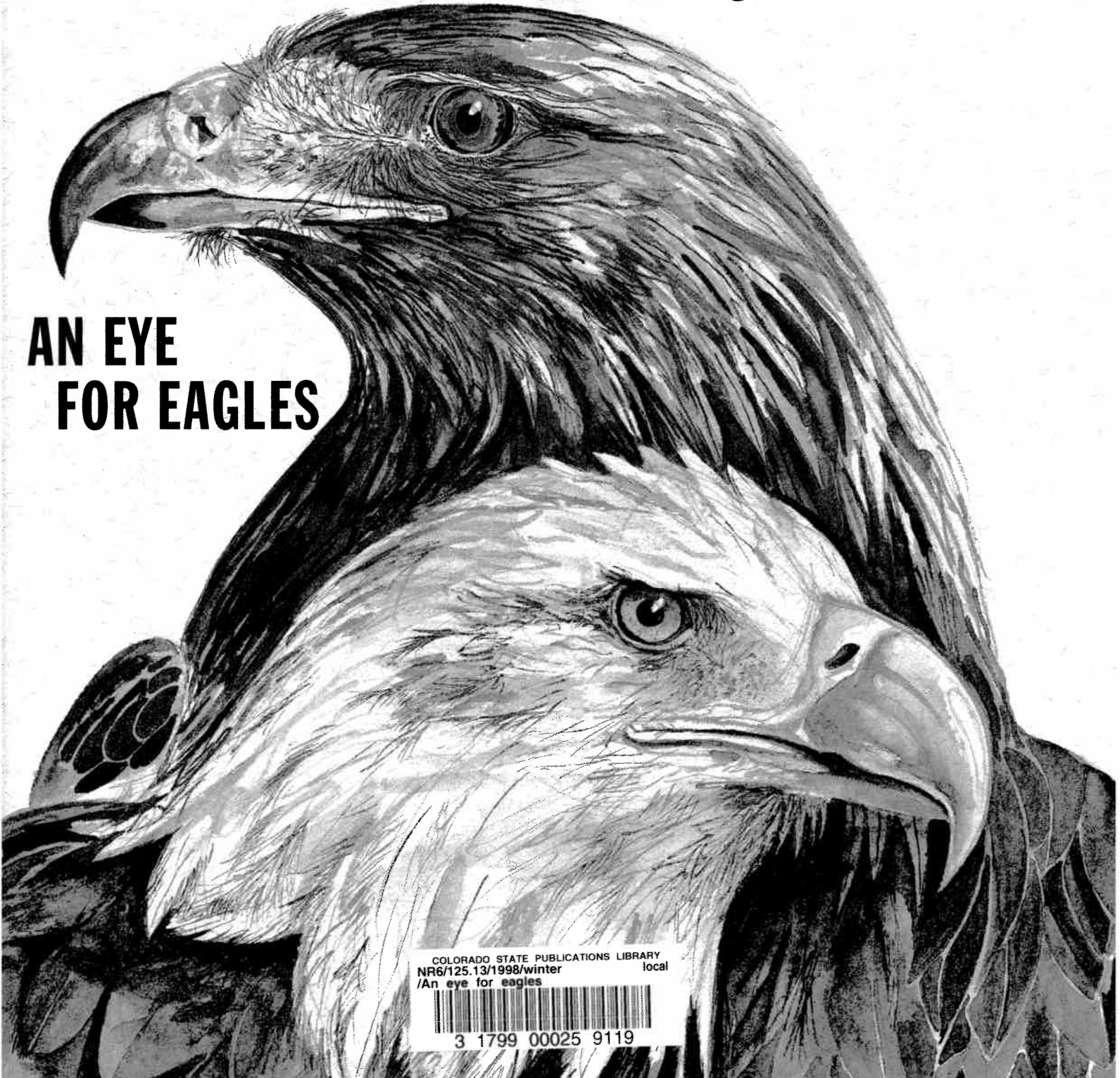
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1998 WINTER COMPENDIUM OF WILDLIFE APPRECIATION



Colorado's Wildlife Company

AN EYE FOR EAGLES



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An eye for eagles
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Double Eagles

By Mary Taylor Gray

We see eagles represented everywhere—in art, on corporate logos, in the emblems of athletic teams and of course as the symbol of the United States. Sometimes it seems one more monumental bronze depicting a fierce-eyed eagle—talons extended, broad wings sweeping the sky—and the eagle will join the howling coyote as a tiresome cliché.

But then you see a golden eagle perched on a post along a country road, an enormous bird with the talons and beak of a consummate hunter, turning to look straight at you in frank appraisal. Or you watch a pair of bald eagles, heads a crisp snowy white, flying together like lovers, joining talons and tumbling through the air, unbound by the laws of gravity. Then all the trite images fade and you're reminded again of the grandeur and magnificence of eagles.

EAGLES OVER COLORADO

Eagles, not specified by species, are the number one wild animal nationwide that Americans want to see. And Colorado is a great place to see them. We have healthy populations of both golden and bald eagles, and winter offers prime viewing. The big concentrations of bald eagles, up to 1,200 birds, arrive in our state in late autumn, attracted by our relatively mild winters and abundance of waterfowl and prairie dogs. Most of those birds leave again in February and March, heading north to nesting grounds in the northern U.S., Canada and Alaska. A few bald eagles do remain year-round in Colorado. In the summer of 1997 DOW biologists located 29 active bald eagle nests in the state.

Unlike bald eagles, golden eagles are common nesting birds in Colorado, with an estimated 600 to 900 active nests, concentrated in the northwestern part of the state. In winter, golden eagles are more broadly distributed across the state, in nearly every habitat. They are particularly visible on the eastern plains at this season, perched on power poles along country roads.

BALD OR GOLDEN?

For many people, an eagle is an eagle, but the two species inhabiting North America—the bald eagle and the golden eagle—differ from one another

in both appearance and lifestyle. Golden eagles are named for the golden wash on the head and nape which contrasts with the dark brown body. An adult golden eagle can't be confused with a mature bald eagle, whose white head and tail are unmistakable. The younger birds, however, can confuse observers. Young bald eagles do not attain the white head until their fourth or fifth year. Until then, they are mostly brown and often confused with golden eagles. To muddy the water further, both immature golden and bald eagles have a broad band of white at the base of the tail. Compared to the golden eagle, the bald eagle has a larger head and shorter tail in proportion to its body. Its bill is very large and very yellow; the golden's dark bill is less imposing.

Bald eagles are primarily fishers, thus they usually inhabit areas near water. Despite their fierce appearance, they often scavenge prey from smaller raptors. Their legs are unfeathered to reduce drag in the water, unlike the dryland-hunting golden eagle whose legs are feathered to the feet. Bald eagles build large nests of sticks in tall trees near water.

The golden eagle is a bird of rugged cliffs, canyons and the adjacent open country where it feeds on a broad range of birds, reptiles and mammals, though jackrabbits are its primary prey.

The eagle's legendary ability to carry off calves and lambs, and, in some fairy tales, young children, is just that—a legend. Studies found an adult golden eagle weighing 11 pounds could comfortably carry two pounds of weight, but could not lift off if five pound weights were attached to its feet. Adult male eagles weigh 11-13 pounds and females 15-20 pounds.

While the bald eagle is restricted to North America, the golden is found throughout the Northern Hemisphere. Mirroring the bald eagle's importance as the symbol of the United States, the golden eagle has been a symbol of power and majesty to European cultures for centuries. Eagles appear on heraldic crests and coats of arms of royal families throughout Europe, and only royalty were permitted to use eagles for falconry.

The golden eagle was an important bird to Native Americans as well. Prized as tokens of strength, valor and power, eagle feathers are still used in ceremonies. An Arapaho named Old Man

Gun reputedly built a golden eagle trap atop the summit of Longs Peak in what is now Rocky Mountain National Park.

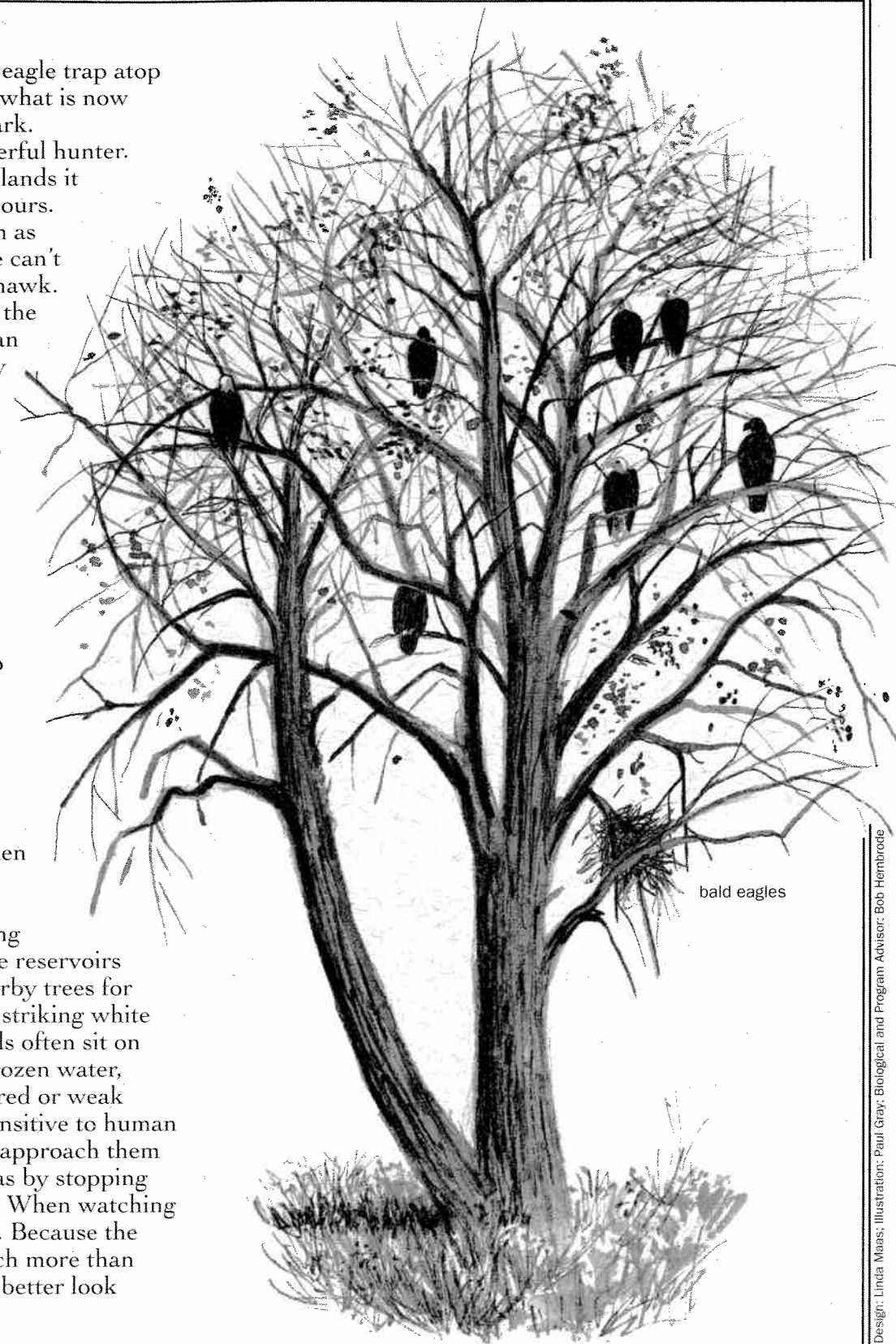
The golden eagle is a powerful hunter. Circling above hills and grasslands it may soar on wide wings for hours. With wings spanning as much as seven and a half feet, an eagle can't be mistaken for even a large hawk. Spotting prey on the ground, the eagle thunders earthward in an immense "stoop" or predatory dive, grabbing and killing its prey with sharp, powerful talons. At times golden eagles may reach speeds of an estimated 150-200 mph that rival the plunging dive of the peregrine falcon, a much smaller bird.

AN EYE FOR EAGLES

In winter, you are likely to see eagles almost anywhere in Colorado—eastern plains, intermountain valleys, western plateaus and mesas—with the exception of mountaintops. Watch for golden eagles in open or broken country, soaring overhead or perched on poles or other vantage points. When traveling along waterways or near large reservoirs or other open water, scan nearby trees for the large, upright shapes and striking white heads of bald eagles. The birds often sit on the ice at the edge of partly frozen water, seeking not only fish but injured or weak waterfowl. Eagles are very sensitive to human disturbance so be sure not to approach them or unduly harass them, such as by stopping your car beneath a roost tree. When watching eagles use your car as a blind. Because the birds will tolerate the car much more than human figures, you will get a better look without stressing the birds.

IN THE COMPANY OF EAGLES

One of the great things about eagle-viewing is that it's for everybody, not just the active outdoors adventurer. Many of the best eagle watching opportunities are from vehicles—along I-70 following the Colorado River or in other locations that don't require even leaving



the car. It seems somehow appropriate that these dramatic birds, symbols of our country, are so accessible and visible to Coloradans of all ages, backgrounds and physical abilities. And don't feel embarrassed if the sight of an eagle brings a lump to your throat. Eagles just kind of do that to you.

Bald Eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*

○ **Field ID:** Dark brown plumage with snowy white head and tail, yellow beak, unfeathered yellow legs and talons. Immature birds lack the white head and have mottled white markings on the tail and underparts. Immature Bald Eagles are often mistaken for Golden Eagles.
Size: 31-37 inches.

Habitat: Rivers, lakes, reservoirs and open water; open country around prairie dog towns.

○ **Field Notes:** Bald Eagles make quite a sight in winter among the bare cottonwoods along a river or reservoir, their white heads dotting the branches like ornaments. In 1997 there were 29 known Bald Eagle nest sites in the state. The breeding birds remain in Colorado year-round. Be sure to avoid disturbing any nests or nesting adults you might be aware of. Bald Eagles suffered severely from DDT poisoning, shooting, and habitat loss. Previously endangered, their numbers have improved significantly after decades of conservation efforts and they are now classified as a threatened species.

○ **Family:** Hawks
(excerpted with permission from *The Guide to Colorado Birds* by Mary Taylor Gray, Westcliffe Publishers, 1998)



golden eagle

25 Great Places To See Eagles In Winter



Front Range

- Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR, Commerce City
- The mouth of Clear Creek Canyon along Hwy 6
- Dakota Hogback Hawk Watch
- Barr Lake State Park
- Standley Lake
- Roxborough State Park
- Boulder County Open Space

Northeast

- Pawnee Buttes, Pawnee National Grassland
- Jackson Reservoir, Weld County
- All reservoirs along the Platte River

Southeast

- Swallows Watchable Wildlife Site, Pueblo Reservoir
- Along the Arkansas River, Pueblo to the state line
- John Martin Reservoir, Lamar
- Picketwire Canyonlands

Northwest

- Along the White and Yampa rivers
- North Park along Hwy 125 from Walden to the Wyoming border
- Arapaho NWR
- Along the Colorado River from the Eagle River west to the state line and into Utah
- Plateau Creek at the base of Grand Mesa
- Cedar Mountain near Craig

Southwest

- Mesa Verde National Park
- Animas City Mountain
- San Luis Valley - Monte Vista/Alamosa NWR
- San Luis Lakes State Park

Across The State

- The Amtrak train trip from Denver past Grand Junction to the state line

For directions to the above sites, consult the *Colorado Wildlife Viewing Guide*, the *Colorado Atlas and Gazetteer*, or contact the appropriate resource agency.

Golden Eagle *Aquila chrysaetos*

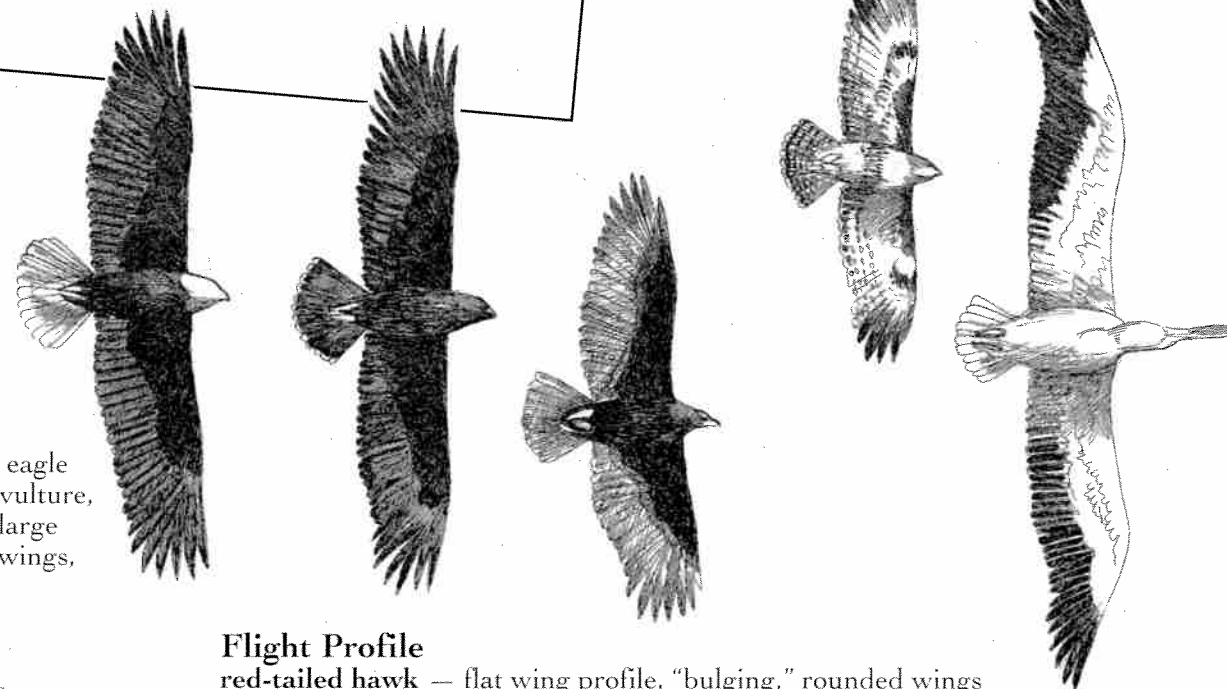
Field ID: Rich dark brown with a light golden wash over head and nape. Unlike the Bald Eagle, the golden's legs are feathered down to the feet. Beak and head are smaller than the Bald Eagle, but the tail is longer. Immature birds have a white tail with a dark terminal band. Size: 30-40 inches.

Habitat: Grasslands, shrublands, pine forests, cliffs and canyons at the edge of open country.

Field Notes: With its very large size and uniform dark appearance, a Golden Eagle shouldn't be mistaken for any of the large, dark hawks. In flight it is impressive, its wingspan spreading seven feet or more, with wings often tipped slightly up. Golden Eagles are more common in Colorado in winter and distributed statewide. There are an estimated 600-900 active Golden Eagle nests in the state, concentrated in northwestern Colorado. Golden Eagles choose cliff nesting sites on the edge of open country, where they hunt for small mammals and other prey.

Family: Hawks

(excerpted with permission from *The Guide to Colorado Birds* by Mary Taylor Gray, Westcliffe Publishers, 1998)



Eagle ID

You can distinguish an eagle in flight from a turkey vulture, pelican or hawk by its large size, very large, broad wings, and wing profile.

Wingspans

- red-tailed hawk - 4-5 feet
- turkey vulture - 5-6 feet
- golden eagle - 6-7 feet
- bald eagle - 6-7 feet
- American white pelican - 8-9 feet

Flight Profile

- red-tailed hawk — flat wing profile, "bulging," rounded wings
- turkey vulture — wings tipped up in a dihedral, very small head
- white pelican — heavy body shape, large head and long bill, extremely broad wingspan, black wingtips
- bald eagle — flat wing profile, large head, head and tail of equal length
- golden eagle — wings flat or tipped slightly up at the wrists, head one-third length of tail

CAUTION

Never approach or attempt to climb up to the nest of a bald or golden eagle, both for the protection of the birds and for your own safety. It is illegal to possess any eagle feathers or body parts, nests, eggs or live birds without a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Both bald and golden eagles are protected from killing or harassment by the Bald Eagle Protection Act. This includes a ban on pursuit, shooting, shooting at, poisoning, trapping, capturing, collecting, molesting or disturbing eagles. So the point is, enjoy looking at eagles, but don't do anything else!



Eagle Events

The 4th Annual Pueblo Eagle Day, Saturday February 6, 1999, 9 am to 3 pm, at Lake Pueblo State Park and Pueblo State Wildlife Area offers speakers, a slide show on Colorado wildlife, live raptor demonstrations by Hawks Aloft, guided walks, a raptor ID workshop and eagle viewing along the Arkansas River, with spotting scopes provided. For more information, call 719-473-2945 ex. 5221.

Eagle Fest '99 at Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge, Saturday February 20, 1999, 9 am to 3 pm, will celebrate the winter return of up to 100 bald eagles to the Refuge. Keep your eyes to the sky to catch a glimpse of the Refuge's famous winter visitors. Free activities, games and prizes for the entire family, live birds of prey, Eagle Express wildlife tours, tours of the new visitors center exhibits, including a crawl-through prairie dog burrow. Park at the west or south gates and ride the shuttle in to the fest. No reservations required. Call Sherry at 303-289-0659 for more information.

Nongame Checkoff Supporters, Take A Bow For Bald Eagle Recovery!

Thank you, *Colorado's Wildlife Company* readers, for helping save the bald eagle. Your voluntary contributions through the nongame checkoff on your state income tax form have helped support bald eagle recovery. Bald eagles are doing so well, up from only one breeding pair in the state in the 1970s to 29 active nests in 1997, that they were downlisted from endangered to threatened and may even come off the list entirely.

The term "nongame" encompasses those species that are neither hunted nor fished. In fact, most of Colorado's wildlife, some 773 species including 26 classified as threatened or endangered, are nongame. To support conservation and study of this wildlife, the Division of Wildlife created the nongame checkoff on the state income tax form in 1977, making Colorado the first state to do so.



Nearly 60,000 Coloradans have supported the checkoff. In 1997, citizens donated \$356,030 through the checkoff, amounting to .46% of DOW's annual budget of \$76.7 million. That's a lot of money for a voluntary donation from citizens to a state agency.

Names of checkoff donors are confidential, so we don't know who you are, but we're sure many *Colorado's Wildlife Company* readers supported the checkoff. So our hats are off to you! Your dollars helped prairie-chickens and otters, wood frogs, even our state fish, the greenback cutthroat trout.

When April 15th rolls around in a few months, you'll once again have a chance to do your part to help Colorado wildlife by donating to the nongame checkoff. The wildlife can't thank you so we'll do it for them. Coloradans, thanks a lot!



ENROLL IN THE NEXT WATCHABLE WILDLIFE VIEWING SKILLS WORKSHOP

"Wildlife Watch" is an 8 to 10 hour, family-oriented workshop covering where, when and how to see wildlife; wildlife identification; ecosystems; how to use binoculars and spotting scopes; ethics; the basics of wildlife management; and a field trip. Price is \$30 per person or \$40 per family (not recommended for children under 12 due to length and intensity of class sessions). Workshops will be held around the state. To find out about classes, call (303) 291-7258 or fax (303) 291-7110.

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 **Watchable
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