

Wisconsin Bald Eagle Nest Survey – 2017



Survey Team

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Summary

Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (WDNR) staff from the Bureau of Natural Heritage Conservation and Wildlife Management completed statewide aerial nesting surveys for bald eagles in cooperation with WDNR pilots in spring 2017. This marked the 45th consecutive year that the bald eagle occupancy survey has been completed in Wisconsin, which makes it one of the longest running surveys of its kind in North America. The surveys this year found 1,590 occupied eagle nests, which are the highest number ever recorded. Each county was surveyed and occupied eagle nests were observed in 69 of 72 (96%) counties in 2017. Additional project work included nest identification and avoidance guidance, construction project reviews, forest management guidance, and overwintering eagle counts throughout the state.

Acknowledgments

Local eagle nest information was provided by numerous WDNR field staff and reports from the public. Aircraft pilots flying these surveys included: Mike Weinfurter (Rhineland), David Lemke (Rhineland), Leo Bunderson (Eau Claire), Joe Sprenger (Siren), Paul Christensen (Siren), Mike Callahan (Oshkosh), Luke Wuest (Oshkosh), Tori Ballweg (Madison), and Jeff Oimoen (Madison).

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Bald Eagles

All nest surveys were completed using a WDNR aircraft and pilot and at least one other trained observer. The bald eagle nest occupancy surveys began earlier than normal because of early nesting activity observed across the state and were flown between early March to mid-April to locate occupied nests. Additional ground observations were provided by landowners, birders, eBird, volunteers and raptor banders; this information is used to supplement and check aerial data. Regional reports were collected by area observers (Appendix 1) that detail bald eagle nest locations by county (Figure 1).

In 2017, a total of 1,590 bald eagle nests were found to be occupied by breeding adults (Figure 1). This was an increase of 86 nests from the 2016 survey (Figure 2). An occupied nest was defined as a nest where one or more of the following was observed: an incubating adult, eggs, young, or a repaired nest. As in past years, Vilas ($n = 168$) and Oneida ($n = 141$) counties had the highest number of occupied eagle nests. These two counties represent most of the Northern Highland Ecological Landscape, which has one of the highest concentrations of freshwater lakes in the world. Bald eagles occupied nests in 69 of the state's 72 counties in 2017 (96%; Figure 1), and the number of occupied nests continued to increase in all portions of the state except in the northeast.

This year marked two firsts for the eagle survey. One was an active eagle nest discovered in Kenosha County for the first time during these surveys. The other occurred in Oneida County where no new territories were found for the first time since surveys began in 1973.

Occupied eagle nest numbers continued to rise in most areas of the state. The number of occupied nests within survey area 2 (Appendix 1) continued to grow, increasing from 511 in 2016 to 526 in 2017 (Table 1). This area appears to have one of the highest densities of nesting bald eagles anywhere in North America. Survey area 6, in southwest Wisconsin, had the greatest percent increase (31%) of occupied nests. Statewide, there was an overall increase in occupied nests of 5.7% from 2016 to 2017 (Table 1).

The Federal Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act provides protection for all eagle nests, nest trees, and adjacent habitat. Throughout the state, project staff were contacted by private

landowners and public land managers for recommendations to protect bald eagle and osprey nests from disturbance. On public properties, habitat is managed to promote tall snags and large, super-canopy white pines for nest trees. Project staff annually provide recommendations at over 100 sites to protect nests where disturbances such as timber sales, utility and telecommunication projects, housing development, and road construction are being planned. In the past 25 years, WDNR staff made management recommendations that protected over 80% of all known eagle nests. Accurate nest locations, nesting activity, and management guidance continue to be important factors in the long term conservation of Wisconsin's bald eagle and osprey populations.

Wintering Eagles

Wintering bald eagle numbers were recorded throughout Wisconsin during the annual Midwinter Bald Eagle Survey, which is conducted in conjunction with the winter waterfowl surveys in the state by DNR field staff, landowners, and volunteers. In 2017, the count was conducted between January 4th and January 18th. Annually, observers count the number of bald eagles observed on specific routes conducted by plane, vehicle, boat, and on foot. In 2017, 48 midwinter bald eagle survey routes were completed with observers reporting 481 bald eagles (303 adult, 154 immature, and 24 unknown). This count represented a 27% decrease in the number of eagles observed in the previous winter's count. This decrease was largely attributed to limited snow and ice coverage across most of the state during the reporting period. With these conditions, over-wintering eagles are less likely to concentrate at traditional feeding and roosting areas that these surveys target.

Table 1. Summary of 2017 bald eagle occupancy surveys in Wisconsin.

Survey Area¹	Occupied Territories 2016	Occupied Territories 2017	Percent Increase or Decrease from 2016-2017
Area 1	357	360	+ 0.8%
Area 2	511	526	+ 2.9%
Area 3	176	171	-2.8%
Area 4	56	59	+ 5. 4%
Area 5	211	224	+6.2%
Area 6	162	212	+ 30.9%
Area 7	31	38	+ 22.6%
Total Territories	1504	1590	+5.7%

¹ Survey Areas are shown in Appendix 1.

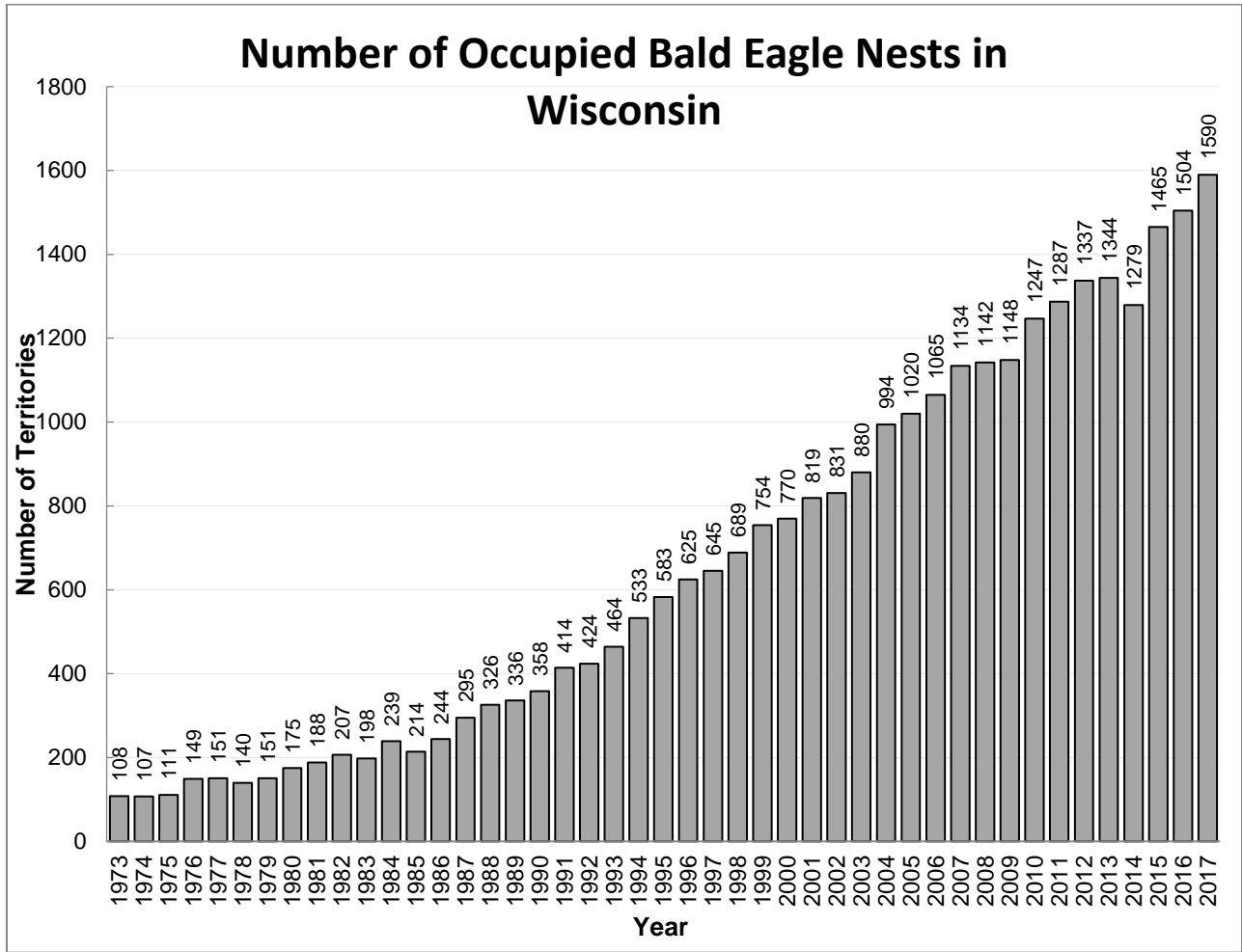


Figure 2. Occupied bald eagle nests in Wisconsin, 1973-2017. Bald eagle information for the years 1973 to 1989 was summarized from annual surveys completed by Charles Sindelar, Waukesha, WI.

Appendix 1. Wisconsin Natural Heritage Inventory (NHI) eagle and osprey contact list.

DNR Area Eagle/Osprey Survey Contacts

For the latest and most complete information on the location of eagle and osprey nests (rev. 10/2017) contact:

Area 1

Ryan Magana, 715-635-4153
DNR, 810 W Maple St.
Spooner, WI 54801
Ryan.Magana@wisconsin.gov

Area 2

Carly Lapin, 715-365-8954
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Rhineland, WI 54501
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Area 3

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Green Bay, WI 54313
Joseph.Henry@wisconsin.gov

Area 4

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DNR, 107 Sutliff Ave.
Rhineland, WI 54501
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Area 5a

Mike Stelpflug, 608-332-1878
DNR, 3550 Mormon Coulee Rd.
La Crosse, WI 54601
Michael.Stelpflug@wisconsin.gov

Area 5b

Dean Edlin, 608-685-3252
DNR, PO Box 88
Alma, WI 54610
Dean.Edlin@wisconsin.gov

Area 6

Rich Staffen, 608-266-4340
DNR, 101 S. Webster St.
Madison, WI 53703
Richard.Staffen@wisconsin.gov

Area 7

Sharon Fandel, 608-275-3207
DNR, 3911 Fish Hatchery Rd.
Fitchburg, WI 53711
Sharon.Fandel@wisconsin.gov

If unable to reach area representative, contact:

Laura Jaskiewicz, 715-365-8922
DNR, 107 Sutliff Ave,
Rhineland, WI 54501
Laura.Jaskiewicz@wisconsin.gov

Eagle Carcass Submissions Required for:

**Banded Eagles*

**Potential Law Enforcement cases*

