

## **Midwinter survey spots record number of bald eagles in state**

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An annual survey of wintering bald eagles conducted Jan. 7 throughout Massachusetts yielded sightings of at least 102 individual birds, breaking the all-time state record set in 2009.

About 50 state and federal wildlife officials and volunteers observed birds through binoculars and spotting scopes on the ground and from the air during the one-day event as part of a national survey.

State data is pooled with national data and used by wildlife officials to track the progress of the recovery of the bald eagle, which was taken off the federal list of endangered and threatened species in 2007.

The 2011 preliminary statewide number was 102 eagles, with 75 adults, 23 juveniles and four of unknown age. The largest number of birds — 33 eagles — was seen at the Quabbin Reservoir.

“The successful restoration of the bald eagle population in Massachusetts has a remarkable history that extends over 30 years,” said Secretary of Energy and Environmental Affairs Richard K. Sullivan.

“This annual survey and other year-round efforts by biologists and volunteers have helped to protect these national symbols and their habitat.”

Among the sightings on Jan. 7 were 11 eagles on the Merrimack River and five at the Wachusett Reservoir. There were 18 eagles spotted on the Connecticut River; two eagles on the Mystic Lakes in Arlington; two on the Housatonic River in Sheffield, and one in Orange. There were five eagles spotted in the Lakeville/Middleborough area; two eagles spotted at the Wattapa Ponds in Westport; three eagles on the Chicopee River; two on the Deerfield River; and one on the Westfield River.

Officials and volunteers traveled to several known eagle locations across the state, from Newburyport to Pittsfield, during the event in January.

Statewide, the number of birds surveyed has risen from eight birds counted in 1979 to 102 birds counted this year. Annual surveys in 2010 and 2009 spotted 72 and 81 birds, respectively.

“This survey gives us vital information about bald eagles’ habitat preferences and helps our biologists monitor their populations,” said Department of Fish and Game Commissioner Mary Griffin, who assisted wildlife officials with the count in Lakeville. “I would like to thank the many dedicated volunteers, staff and conservationists braving cold and blustery conditions to provide the information needed for the national survey.”

## **National survey**

The annual Midwinter Bald Eagle Survey is a nationwide event coordinated by the U.S. Geological Survey and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Each year, between 25 and 41 states participate, according to the Geological Survey. The nationwide total of bald eagles counted during this annual event ranges from 13,000 to 16,000 birds.

The Division of Fisheries and Wildlife has taken part in the national survey since its inception in 1979. By collecting leg band data on the birds, MassWildlife has documented that eagles wintering in Massachusetts include Bay State natives and birds from Maine, New Hampshire, New York, Connecticut, New Jersey and Pennsylvania. The annual count provides wildlife managers with information on local eagle populations, helps officials identify and monitor critical wintering areas, and fosters public interest in bald eagles and their conservation.

In 2010, there were 32 bald eagle pairs statewide located in breeding territories, including the Quabbin Reservoir, Connecticut and Merrimack rivers, and areas in Plymouth, Bristol, Berkshire and Worcester counties. In 2010, 27 nests produced chicks, and 40 young eagles survived to fledge.

## **Almost decimated**

A victim of habitat loss and reproductive failure linked to exposure to pesticides such as DDT, bald eagle populations plummeted across the country by the time it was first listed as an endangered species under the U.S. Endangered Species Preservation Act of 1966. The eagle remained listed under the U.S. Endangered Species List of 1973.

Their numbers have since rebounded and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service removed them from the federal list in July 2007.

Listed as endangered in Massachusetts since the 1980s, bald eagles remain on the state list but are gaining ground in the Bay State — thanks in large part to the restoration project begun in 1982. MassWildlife and its partners brought young eagles from Canada and Michigan and raised them in cages overlooking the Quabbin Reservoir. Some of the eaglets remained and began to nest in the Quabbin, later spreading to the Connecticut River and eventually across the state.

In 1989, eight decades after the last historic bald eagle nest was observed in Massachusetts (on Snake Pond in Sandwich), the first three chicks fledged (hatched and survived to fly from Massachusetts nests) from two Quabbin nests. Nine bald eagle pairs nested at the Quabbin Reservoir in 2010.

Eagle restoration efforts are supported by a combination of public and private sources, including the Department of Fish and Game, US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Fund, the Massachusetts Audubon Society and National Grid.