

US Forest Service

San Bernardino National Forest

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Bald Eagles Seen In Local Mountains

San Bernardino, Calif., January 12, 2013 – On Saturday January 12, 2013 the second bald eagle count of the winter was conducted by local Federal and State biologists and volunteers around lakes in the southern California.

Despite frigid temperatures, almost 200 hardy volunteers turned out to help count our magnificent national birds. The count helps tally the bald eagles that spend their winter vacations at local lakes. During the winter, our numbers of bald eagles in southern California increase as the resident eagles are joined by eagles that have migrated south to find food.

A grand total of twelve eagles (9 adults and 3 juveniles) were observed at the lake areas during the 1- hour count. Five eagles (3 adults and 2 juveniles) were observed in the Big Bear Lake; Two adult eagles were observed at Lake Arrowhead. No eagles were seen at Lake Gregory. One adult eagle was seen at Silverwood Lake. A pair of adult eagles was observed adding to their nest at Lake Hemet. Two eagles (1 adult and 1 juvenile) thrilled observers at Lake Perris). Juvenile eagles are distinguished by a brown head and tail; adults are recognized by the famous white head and tail - it takes 4-5 years to acquire full adult coloration. Juvenile eagles are the same size as the adults.

Approximately 183 observers participated in the 1-hour eagle census (29 at Big Bear Lake, 8 at Lake Arrowhead/Lake Gregory, 22 at Lake Hemet, 66 at Silverwood Lake, and 58 at Lake Perris). The count coordinators from the Forest Service and State Recreation Areas would like to thank those volunteers for their dedication in getting up early and participating in the eagle census. The success of the eagle counts are entirely dependent on the volunteers!

Cold temperatures did not deter eagle activities. Quite a few volunteers saw their very first bald eagle! Volunteers had to bundle up due to the recent cold spell. During the count period, volunteers in Big Bear braved the single-digit temperatures after it “warmed up” after hitting zero degrees overnight. Even though much of Big Bear Lake was covered with ice, eagles were seen around the pockets of open water where ducks were clustered. Bald eagles forage on ducks and fish.

The remaining bald eagle counts for this winter are scheduled for the following Saturday mornings: February 9 and March 9. No experience needed. Signing up ahead of time is unnecessary – just show up at the designated time and location, dress warmly, bring binoculars and a watch.

- **Big Bear Lake** area volunteers will meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Forest Service's Big Bear Discovery Center on North Shore Drive for orientation. Contact Robin Eliason (reliason@fs.fed.us or 909-382-2832) for more information. Contact the Discovery Center (909-866-2789) for information about Eagle Celebrations.
- **Lake Arrowhead/Lake Gregory** volunteers will meet at 8:00 a.m. at the Skyforest Ranger Station for orientation. Contact Robin Eliason (reliason@fs.fed.us or 909-382-2832) for more information.
- **Silverwood Lake State Recreation Area** volunteers should plan to meet at the Visitor Center at 8:00 a.m. for orientation. Contact Kathy Williams or Mark Wright for more information about volunteering or taking an eagle tour (760-389-2303 between 8:00 and 4:00; or email: khwilliams@parks.ca.gov).
- **Lake Hemet** volunteers should plan on meeting at the Lake Hemet Grocery Store at 8:30 a.m. for orientation. Contact Anne Poopatanapong (apoopatanapong@fs.fed.us or 909-382-2935) for more information.
- **Lake Perris State Recreation Area** volunteers should plan to meet at the Lake Perris Regional Indian Museum at 8:00 for orientation. Contact the office for more information at 951-940-5600.

See websites for additional information about the San Bernardino National Forest (<http://www.fs.fed.us/r5/sanbernardino/>) and the California State Recreation Areas (www.parks.ca.gov).

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Background

The best time of year to see bald eagles in Southern California is during winter months when there is an influx of eagles. Migrating eagles typically begin arriving in the area in late November and leave in late March or early April.

Bald eagles are usually found close to water because their diet is primarily made up of fish and ducks. As winter approaches in those northern regions, lakes freeze over and waterfowl fly south. For bald eagles, that means that the food they eat has become scarce. So, they head south looking for areas with abundant food supplies and end up wintering in sunny southern California!

During the winter, southern California bald eagles are typically found at many of the lakes, including Big Bear Lake, Baldwin Lake, Silverwood Lake, Lake Arrowhead, Green Valley Lake, Grass Valley Lake in the San Bernardino Mountains and Prado Dam, Lake Perris, Lake Hemet, Lake Skinner, Diamond Valley Lake, Lake Matthews, and the Salton Sea to the south.

Through radio-tracking bald eagles, biologists learned that some of the same individual eagles return to the San Bernardino Mountains year after year. We also determined that there is a lot of movement of eagles between the different mountain lakes and that the lakes do not have distinctive separate populations—the eagles regularly move between the mountain lakes.

Radio-tracking and/or banding also revealed that the eagles that winter in the San Bernardino Mountains migrate to Southern California from Montana, Wyoming, Idaho, and Canada. Those regions are likely where most of our migratory bald eagles nest in spring and summer. Some of our San Bernardino Mountains' eagles were tracked all the way to Alberta and the Northwest Territories in Canada - that is about 2,000 miles one-way! For more information regarding bald eagle migratory routes for these and other California eagles go to the University of Santa Cruz Predatory Bird Research Group's web site at (<http://www2.ucsc.edu/scpbrg/baeamigration.htm>). While the evidence suggests a northern interior migration for most of the bald eagles, some of our southern California eagles have traveled fewer miles, moving over from the Channel Islands.

Breeding populations of bald eagles in Southern California were extirpated by the late 1950s. Until reintroduction efforts began in the 1980s on Catalina Island, the southern-most nest site known in California was in Lake County. Since 2003, several pairs of bald eagles have decided that our southern California neighborhoods were too nice to leave – they built nests and have successfully raised families. Nesting bald eagles can now be found at Lake Hemet, Lake Skinner, Lake Matthews, and Big Bear Lake. As the populations continue to grow, more bald eagles are in our future.

This is exactly what happened at Lake Hemet in Riverside County. The female eagle with orange wing tags “02” hatched at San Francisco Zoo in 2000, and was released on Catalina Island as part of the reintroduction efforts. In 2004, she arrived at Lake Hemet and decided to take up year-round residence with the male bald eagle that was already there. Together, the pair has raised successful nests ever since then. In 2012, the first successful bald eagle nesting ever recorded in the San Bernardino Mountains happened in Big Bear Lake!

As bald eagles raise families in southern California, it is now possible to see bald eagles year-round (not just during winter migrations). Because of the influx of migrating bald eagles during the winter, the easiest time to see eagles is still between December and March.

The bald eagle is a success story of the federal Endangered Species Act – through protection under that law, its populations have recovered from the brink of extinction. Captive breeding programs, reintroduction efforts, the banning of DDT, and public education have all helped in the recovery of this species. There are over 10,000 breeding pairs in the United States and they now breed again in all 49 of the continental United States (they have never bred in Hawaii).

Because of the population rebound, bald eagles are no longer in jeopardy of going extinct. While bald eagles are no longer protected under federal Endangered Species Act, they still have full protection under the Bald Eagle Protection Act and under the State of California's Endangered Species Act. These laws make it illegal to harm or harass bald eagles. It is also illegal to possess bald eagle parts, even a feather.

Catching a glimpse of our breath-taking national symbol is relatively easy during winter months. There are some fantastic opportunities for excellent close-up photographs too. Just look in the tallest trees around the lake near open water for perching eagles. Or, if the lake is partly frozen, look for eagles perched on the ice near small groups of ducks using the open water.

If you want to look for eagles in the Big Bear area, stop by the Forest Service's Big Bear Discovery Center (on North Shore Drive, 1-1/2 miles west of Stanfield Cutoff) and pick up a handout on eagles. Also, join us for one of our free public talks and other Eagle Celebration events on January 19th and February 9th.

If you are in Garner Valley and want to see the resident pair, stop by the Forest Service's Lake Hemet Day Use Area and just look across the lake. The birds are often flying overhead fishermen and or sitting in trees above the picnic area.

Remember that human presence may distract or disturb the eagles - so, try to limit your movements and don't make loud noises when they're nearby. If possible, remain in your car while looking at eagles - the car acts as a blind. Stay a respectful distance of at least 200-300' away from perched bald eagles. Do not get closer than 1/4 mile away nesting bald eagles – trying to get a closer look may result in eagles becoming agitated and knocking eggs or chicks out to the nest. It is illegal to harm or harass bald eagles. Please do your part to help protect our national bird!