

Bald eagles return to  
the nestled wetlands of  
Santa Cruz County's  
Harkins Slough

The

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About 200 bird species have been documented by birders in or near Harkins Slough, a nearly hidden area in Santa Cruz County. One apex species that had remained absent from the area—but now needs to be added to the list—is one of North America's largest birds and the nation's symbol of freedom.

A pair of bald eagles have been photographed within this little known portion of Harkins Slough owned by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. According to CDFW environmental scientist Gary Kittleson, while these impressive raptors attempted to nest in the area and at nearby Pinto Lake two years ago, it wasn't until last year that the first documented breeding pair was recorded by the Santa Cruz Bird Club. Kittleson said the pair fledged a chick in March 2014, and it was seen in the nest in mid-April. It left the nest as a young adult at the end of June but was still staying near the parents in August.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service keeps bird records at neighboring Ellicott Slough National Wildlife Refuge, and Watsonville Wetlands Watch, an activist group that advocates for wetlands, noted them in and near Watsonville. Neither list had included bald eagles prior to the Harkins Slough sighting.

With a range that extends from Alaska to northern Mexico, the bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*), is the only eagle unique to North America. However these majestic birds almost disappeared from the lower 48 states, mainly due to the use of the contaminant DDT (see sidebar on Page 37). In recent decades their numbers have rebounded. The federal government removed them from the threatened and endangered species list in August 2007, and now they are expanding their habitat to places like Harkins Slough. California still lists the bald eagle as endangered.

Bald eagles are found near large bodies of open water that provide an abundant

food supply and old-growth trees for nesting. Their diet consists largely of fish and carrion, and they choose the tops of large trees to build nests. Studies have shown eagles typically use and enlarge their nests as they return each year. These nests may reach 10 feet across and weigh as much as a half-ton. Bald eagles mate for life, so the nest hosts multiple chicks over the years.

Females are larger than males, and birds of northern states and provinces tend to be larger than those from the southern portions of the breeding range. Females can weigh up to 14 pounds and display a wingspan of up to 8 feet. The smaller males can weigh up to 10 pounds, with a 6-foot wingspan.

Terris Kasteen is a CDFW environmental scientist who manages CDFW's portion of the Harkins Slough area. The USFWS portion is mostly to the north of Harkins Slough Road. In Santa Cruz County, the CDFW marshland is found between Harkins Slough Road and the railroad tracks.

Story and Photos by **Meade Fischer**