

Up From the Ashes:
The Story of Missouri's Bald Eagles

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Phoenix, the firebird, was a beauty. She was a mythical bird who was thought to have lived for 500 to 1,000 years. The phoenix was the size of an eagle. Some said she had a thousand shades of gold for plumage and her tail was scarlet; her feet were a mix of purple and silver. At the end of her life, the phoenix would gather sticks and build a nest. In her nest, she would create a pile of cinnamon and myrrh. The phoenix would then lay in her nest, and the bird and nest would burn fiercely. The fire burnt so swiftly that in minutes nothing was left but ashes. A new phoenix would emerge from the ashes of the previous phoenix like a prisoner set free. The phoenix became a symbol of glorious resurrection ("Phoenix (mythology)").

Like the mythical phoenix, bald eagles have risen from the ashes of extinction. The low numbers of Missouri bald eagles plummeted to nothing by 1950 (Suckling). This is the story of their dramatic comeback.

The bald eagle is a magnificent bird. It is the emblem of the United States of America. The bald eagle became the United States' national symbol in 1782. Unfortunately, the symbol of the United States almost fell to extinction. Before Europeans settled in the Americas, about 500,000 bald eagles dwelled in North America. The bald eagles' numbers began to decrease as soon as Europeans settled in America. There were about 100,000 bald eagles in 1782 ("Bald Eagle and American Eagle Foundation..."). The birds' numbers dropped as low as 417 nesting pairs in 1963 (Suckling). This means that there were only a handful of bald eagles in each state.

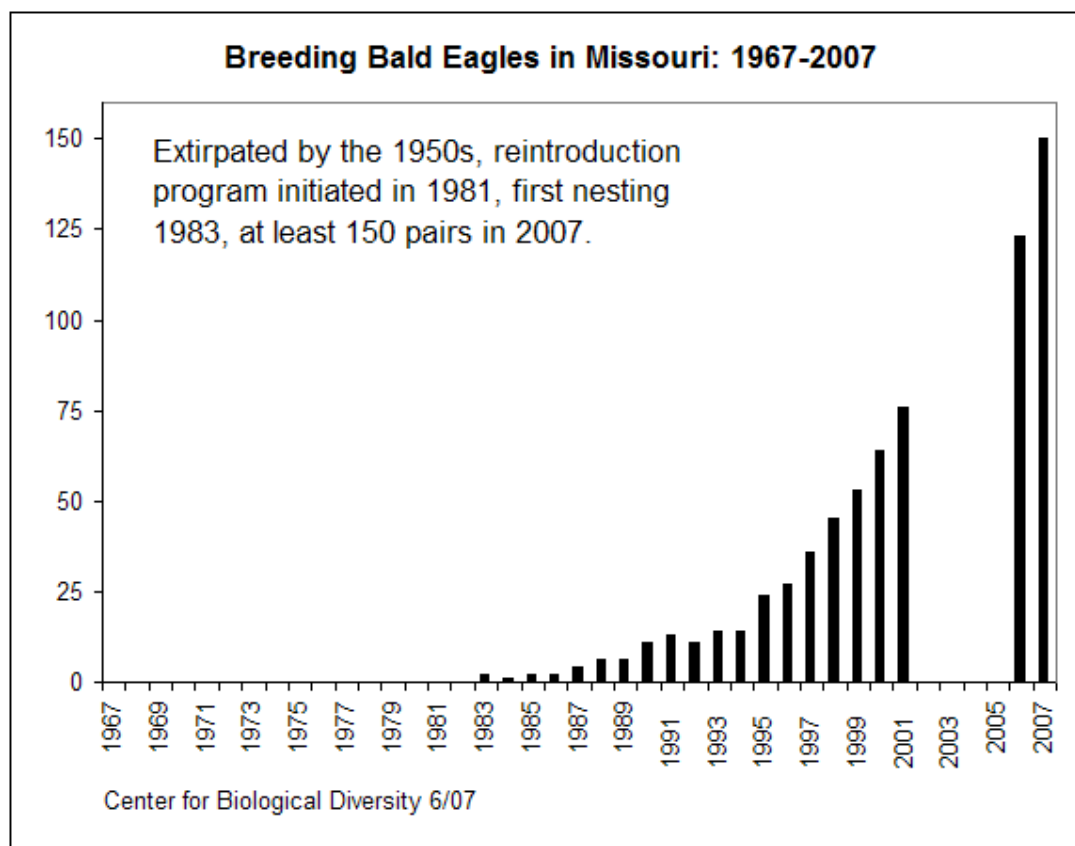
The bald eagles' numbers fell for numerous reasons. Many people hunted the

eagles and destroyed their habitats. Some people shot bald eagles because they thought the birds killed their sheep and cattle. Others killed them for fun. And some killed the birds for no reason. Loss of habitat was another way eagle numbers descended. Swamps were drained, and trees were cut down. Pesticides such as DDT caused eagle eggs to soften. DDT was a pesticide invented to destroy insect pests and was first used in the 1940's. But DDT was a strong pesticide and it softened bald eagles' eggs. This happened in a process. DDT was used on farm land, and soil with DDT in it eroded into streams, rivers, etc. Fish in the water absorbed DDT. A female bald eagle then ate the fish, and DDT entered her body. When the female bald eagle laid her eggs, they had thin shells. So when the mother eagle sat on her eggs, they collapsed. For all these reasons, bald eagle numbers were falling ("The Bald Eagle in Missouri").

Finally, in 1940, the Congress of the United States passed the Bald Eagle Protection Act, which strictly banned the killing or possession of bald eagles. Congress also passed a law that banned DDT ("Bald Eagle & American Eagle Foundation..."). This helped bald eagles recover in most of the lower 48 states (all of the U.S. not including Alaska and Hawaii). Bald eagles were very, very slowly recovering, even though they weren't recovering in some states.

By 1963, only 417 bald eagle nesting pairs lived in the entire United States (Suckling). But this rose to 3,000 nesting pairs living in the U.S. by 1978 (Abbott). That's a pretty huge recovery. In Missouri however, zero nesting pairs inhabited there by 1950. And zero nesting pairs lived in Missouri until 1981. It must have been really

bleak to not sight any bald eagle nests in Missouri for 30 years.



In Missouri, a team of people took action in 1981. The Missouri Department of Conservation, the Dickerson Park Zoo, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service decided to reintroduce bald eagles to Missouri. They formed the hacking program (Crocker). "Hacking involves placing fledgelings in cages atop hacking towers, which contain simulated natural nests (Fischer, 2)." They decided who would take the first action. They chose professional eagle researchers to do the first job. The chosen researchers traveled to the northern United States to find bald eagle nests. The states of Wisconsin, Montana, and Minnesota were the main states involved. When a conservationist found an eagle nest, he (or she) scaled the tree. If there were newly hatched chicks, the conservationist would carefully take the third and youngest chick (the hacking program

took the youngest eaglet because the eaglet would likely be eaten by its older siblings).

He (or she) probably did this when

the parents were away. The

researcher was careful that the

chick was young enough not to

recognize him (or her) later.

Chicks of this age were 6 or 7

weeks old. The helpless chicks

found in eagle nests were taken to

Missouri (Crocker).



Example of a hacking tower.

When the conservationists arrived in Missouri, they took the chicks they had collected to wildlife reserves. Mingo National Wildlife Refuge and Schell Osage Conservation Area were the two places where eaglets were taken. Hacking towers (nesting towers) were built at each location. On each tower a box was built, and a door was built on the box, which opened to the outdoors. When someone pulled a rope attached to the door, the door opened. The chicks were then placed in the completed towers and cared for by the conservationists. The eaglets were fed and cared for every day. But there was a challenge. The workers who raised the eaglets were not allowed to let the eaglets see them. If the chicks saw people, they would remember people. And when the chicks were grown, they would come back to people and beg to be fed. But no chicks did see the workers and it all worked out (Crocker).

When a chick, or eaglet was 12 weeks old, the doors to the towers were opened and the eaglet took its first flight (this means that the eaglet was fledged). Then the

eaglet was gone, at least for a little while. Since the eaglet had a lot to learn about hunting, the workers still fed it. Did this spoil the bald eagle's hunting skills? No. A mother bald eagle still feeds and provides shelter for its eaglet, even after the eaglet leaves the nest and learns to fly and hunt. And after the eaglet leaves its nest, or tower, it is called an immature eagle or fledgeling. These fledgelings gain their skill over time. And as the fledgelings gained their skill, the hacking program stopped feeding them. And so, the immature bald eagles became full-grown bald eagles as more eagles were raised (Crocker).

The Missouri Department of Conservation, the Dickerson Park Zoo, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service raised and released bald eagles for nine years (it was 1990 when they stopped). Seventy-four bald eagles were released during that time (Crocker). The eagles began nesting in Missouri in 1983 because they had been fledged there (Stalicky). A bald eagle remembers the place where it was fledged, and it wants to build its nest there. As a result, bald eagle numbers began to ascend in Missouri. By 2001, 76 nesting pairs occupied Missouri, then 123 nesting pairs in 2006, and over 150 nesting pairs in 2007 (Crocker). Today, there are over 160 nesting pairs living in Missouri (Stalicky). What the hacking program did was terrifically vital towards reintroducing bald eagles in Missouri.

Did you know that thousands of bald eagles spend the winter in Missouri? Well, they do. When a bird spends the winter in a certain place we say it winters there. Over 2,661 bald eagles winter in Missouri every winter (2,661 is the count of how many bald eagles wintered in Missouri during 2012)("The Bald Eagle in Missouri"). You are probably asking, "Why do bald eagles winter in Missouri?" Bald eagles spend their

winters south like other birds. And like other migrating birds, bald eagles migrate south for shelter and food. In the northern United States, lakes freeze making it hard to catch fish. But most lakes and rivers do not freeze in Missouri during the winter, and this makes it easier to find fish. That is why Bald eagles winter in Missouri (Crocker). These birds are easier to find and watch in Missouri during the winter since thousands of them winter there.

Even though the Missouri Department of Conservation, the Dickerson Park Zoo, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service helped bald eagles, dead eagles are found in Missouri every year. You can help bald eagles by listening to the things listed here. Don't litter. Report to the Missouri Department of Conservation if you find an eagle nest. Report about people who are disturbing eagles. These three rules will help protect eagles in Missouri ("My Eagle Journey," 9). You can see bald eagles on special days such as Eagle Days (Eagle Days is a presentation by the Missouri Department of Conservation). You can also see Phoenix the bald eagle in the Dickerson Park Zoo. You will learn about Phoenix in the information below this paragraph.

In the wilderness of Wisconsin, Phoenix the bald eagle hatched in the year of 1989. She was captured when she was an immature eagle. Phoenix was then taken to a hacking tower in Schell-Osage Wildlife Area in Missouri. Eight other eaglets from Alaska and Wisconsin were placed in the same tower as Phoenix. Unlike most other immature eagles, conservationists attached radio transmitters to the nine birds before they hacked (released) the birds in 1989 (Crocker).

Three days after Phoenix was released, her radio showed zero movement. Later, a conservationist found her on the ground, weak and helpless. She was then

carefully carried to the Dickerson Park Zoo and cared for. Determined workers force-fed the poor bird, who hadn't eaten since she was hacked. It was decided that Phoenix did not possess the usual instincts for hunting. Phoenix now needed to be fed by people; she probably would not survive if released again. Since Phoenix could not return to the wild, she has been used for many educational purposes and presentations such as Eagle Days (Crocker).

Phoenix gained her name because she is considered an ambassador of her species. She is sometimes considered the successor of a previous bald eagle named Omega, who lived at the Dickerson Park Zoo and was used in many educational programs. She was even seen on national television. Right before Phoenix arrived, Omega suffered horrible sickness. Omega endured so much that she had to be put down. When Phoenix arrived, it seemed as if she had risen from Omega's ashes. So there was similarity between the story of the firebird phoenix and the story of Phoenix and Omega. And that is how Phoenix gained her name (Crocker).

Phoenix the bald eagle symbolizes the rise of bald eagles in Missouri. And so, like Phoenix the mythical firebird, bald eagles have risen from extinction.



Photo of Phoenix.

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(I wrote my opening paragraph using this information.)