

Our Wintering Birds of Prey
By Larry Hyslop



A Rough-legged Hawk photographed in Big Smoky Valley, photo by Teri Slatauski

Bald eagle populations are increasing in Northeastern Nevada. Each winter well over a dozen are counted in Elko, Eureka, Lander and White Pine Counties, during Nevada's Wintering Birds of Prey Surveys. This increase matches a resurgence across the country, with over 9,800 breeding pairs in the lower 48 states. Most of Nevada's wintering bald eagles are in Southern Nevada (163 pair in 2010) because of the large amount of open water.

Pete Bradley is the non-game biologist for the Nevada Department of Wildlife's Elko office. He says this surge in bald eagle populations comes largely from the ban of DDT in 1972 and the Bald and protective measures in Golden Eagle Protection Act of 1940. Bald eagles winter in Northeastern Nevada because open water offers fishing and our area supplies their other food source; carrion. Road kills, along with dead wildlife and livestock supply eagles with winter food. In general, bald eagles do not kill livestock, but do scavenge carcasses.

Keeping track of population trends through careful monitoring is always important. Pete has been involved with the Wintering Birds of Prey Survey in Nevada for 23 years. Across Nevada, 97 volunteers drove 70 specific highway and gravel routes in 2009 to report 1,931 raptors of 16 species. In Northeastern Nevada, 25 volunteers drive 32 routes once each winter. The results are compiled by Pete and put out in a yearly report.

Not all population trends are as positive as bald eagles. Golden eagle populations are down, although Northeastern Nevada has the highest numbers in the state. We also have the most eagle nests and wintering habitat. Pete attributes the West-wide population declines to higher mortality among juvenile golden eagles, although the exact cause remains a mystery. Certainly, electrocution from power lines, lead poisoning from eating animals killed with lead shot, vehicle collisions and illegal shooting adds to mortality. Accidental poisoning, along with secondary poisoning when they eat poisoned ground squirrel carcasses or occasional intentional poisoning, also kills eagles.

Another raptor showing a wintering downward trend are rough-legged hawks, although our area has the state's vast majority. These hawks nest on arctic tundra. In North America, they drop down from Upper Canada and Alaska to winter in our area. Their nesting neighbors are the snowy owls and both raptor species show population cycles based on the availability of rabbits on their nesting grounds. Climate change could result in fewer rough-legs coming south or perhaps not coming as far south each winter. Pete hopes to get population data from Canada and Alaska to help explain what is happening here.

I asked Pete about raven numbers but these raptors have only recently been counted on surveys so no trend data is yet available. In January 2009, they made up 59% of the birds of prey tallied during the survey. He said man-caused factors have enabled population numbers undoubtedly higher than

historical populations. Today's raven populations have dependable food supplies in road kills and open dumps.

Pete says data collected from each volunteer's route is critical, but a single route's data can be highly variable year to year. Data collected from all volunteers across Nevada during one winter is much more useful and reveals more answers. This same data collected over several years can produce answers to questions concerning the long-term well-being of our wintering birds of prey.

Elko Daily Free Press, "Nature Notes", 3/1/2012

© Gray Jay Press, Elko, NV

Return to [Elko Nature Notes](#)