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I remember vividly the first time I saw a bald eagle. It was a frigid January morning in Lake Guntersville State Park. The sun was just coming up, and I had spent two hours on the road to see an animal I knew only from pictures. I had binoculars around my neck, as did many of the other people gathered there. Some were serious birders, and one kind soul had set up a field scope the size of a bathtub and let the rest of us take turns peeking through. When my turn came I peered through the lens at the stunning profile of a bald eagle perched in the limbs of a pine. As I looked, it swiveled its head in my direction and piercing yellow eyes met mine and watched intently. It was a moment I won't soon forget.

I have all the respect in the world for Ben Franklin, but I agree with our other founding fathers that the bald eagle makes a much better national bird than the wild turkey. Biologists call the easily recognized bald eagle *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*, which, when roughly translated, means a sea eagle with a white head.

Bald eagles are found only in North America, and are in every state except Hawaii. About half of the existing 70,000 bald eagles live in Alaska. These predatory birds have better eyesight than you or I, have a wingspan broader than a basketball player is tall, and can fly up to 35 miles an hour. They also have sharp talons, a strong beak, and 7000 feathers covering their body that not only enable them to fly, but also insulate them from the cold; all perfect adaptations for a bird that lives close to the water and feeds on fish. Bald eagles can live up to 30 years, and mate for life.

Until 1995, the bald eagle was listed as endangered under the Endangered Species Act in 43 of the 48 lower states, and listed as threatened in Wisconsin, Minnesota, Michigan,

Washington and Oregon. In July of 1995, the US Fish and Wildlife Service upgraded the status of bald eagles in the lower 48 states to “threatened”, and they may soon be delisted altogether.

The Alabama bald eagle population is slowly but surely increasing. The Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources (ADCNR) has monitored these birds since 1984 for their Alabama Bald Eagle Restoration Project, counting them each year from January to May. From 1985 to 1991, the Project released 91 juvenile bald eagles at different areas throughout the state in an effort to bring back a successful breeding population, which our state hadn’t seen since the 1950s. ADCNR’s efforts were rewarded in 1991 with two successful eagle nests. Over a decade later, the bald eagle population continues to increase in our state each year, with 53 nests counted in 2004, 61 in 2005, and 77 in 2006.

Keep your eyes open! Bald eagles have been sighted in both Mobile and Baldwin counties during this time of year, and state parks or birding groups often have special eagle viewing events. Prime viewing hours are early mornings and late afternoons, when the birds are most actively hunting. If you see a bald eagle nesting, be sure to report it to the Wildlife and Freshwater Fisheries Division at (256) 760-8233. Happy birding!