

Bald Eagles

The Ultimate Raptors

Written and Photographed by

STAN TEKIELA

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Adventure Publications
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Dedication

To my mother, whose love and support has allowed me to soar with the eagles.





Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the National Eagle Center and all its staff and volunteers, whose extensive knowledge of Bald Eagles has contributed to the accuracy of this book. Your dedication to educating the public about eagles is unsurpassed. Special thanks to the staff and volunteers at The Raptor Center, College of Veterinary Medicine at the University of Minnesota, for all the hard work rehabilitating injured raptors and reaching out to the public with educational programs.

Thanks!

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The majesty of eagles

If you've ever seen an eagle fly gracefully over an unbroken forest or watched it snatch a fish from the surface of a crystal-clear lake, you probably experienced the same inspirational feeling that has touched people throughout the ages. From ancient days to current times, the eagle has been greatly admired. It has also played an important role in the history of many cultures.



A symbol through the ages

Greek and Roman legends claim that only the eagle had enough speed of flight and strength in its talons to snatch thunderbolts away from their god kings (Zeus and Jupiter, respectively). With stories like these adding to its image, the eagle became synonymous with power, skill and cunning in many cultures.

An eagle was used in ancient Egypt to symbolize the goddess Nekhbet, who was the eagle deity. She was considered the protector of the Pharaoh by spreading her wings.

The eagle that influenced the history of these nations, however, was not the Bald Eagle. Ancient cultures and Europeans were familiar only with the Golden Eagle and several other eagle species found throughout the world. Unknown to Asia, Africa, Europe and the rest of the Old World, the Bald Eagle is native solely to North America.





American Indian mythology

It's no surprise that in the past, American Indians had seen the beauty of the Bald Eagle and chose it for their symbols, often carving its image into totems. Many tribes adopted it as a symbol of honor, achievement, leadership and bravery.

Comanche Indians tell a creation story about a chief's young son who died. After the father offered prayers, the boy came back to life as a large and powerful bird—the first eagle. The Comanche eagle dance celebrates this colorful legend.

In other American Indian cultures, the Bald Eagle serves as an intermediary between the Creator and the people. Pawnee Indians saw the Bald Eagle as a symbol of fertility because eaglets, in their large nests high off the ground, were safe and well protected from intruders and were thriving.

Eagle feathers remain highly revered in American Indian culture today. Regarded as holy objects, they are used in many American Indian religious ceremonies.

It is important to note that strict federal and state laws prohibit the owning, selling or trading of any Bald Eagle feathers or body parts. Please be informed of laws and be respectful of eagles, reporting abuses you witness to the proper authorities.

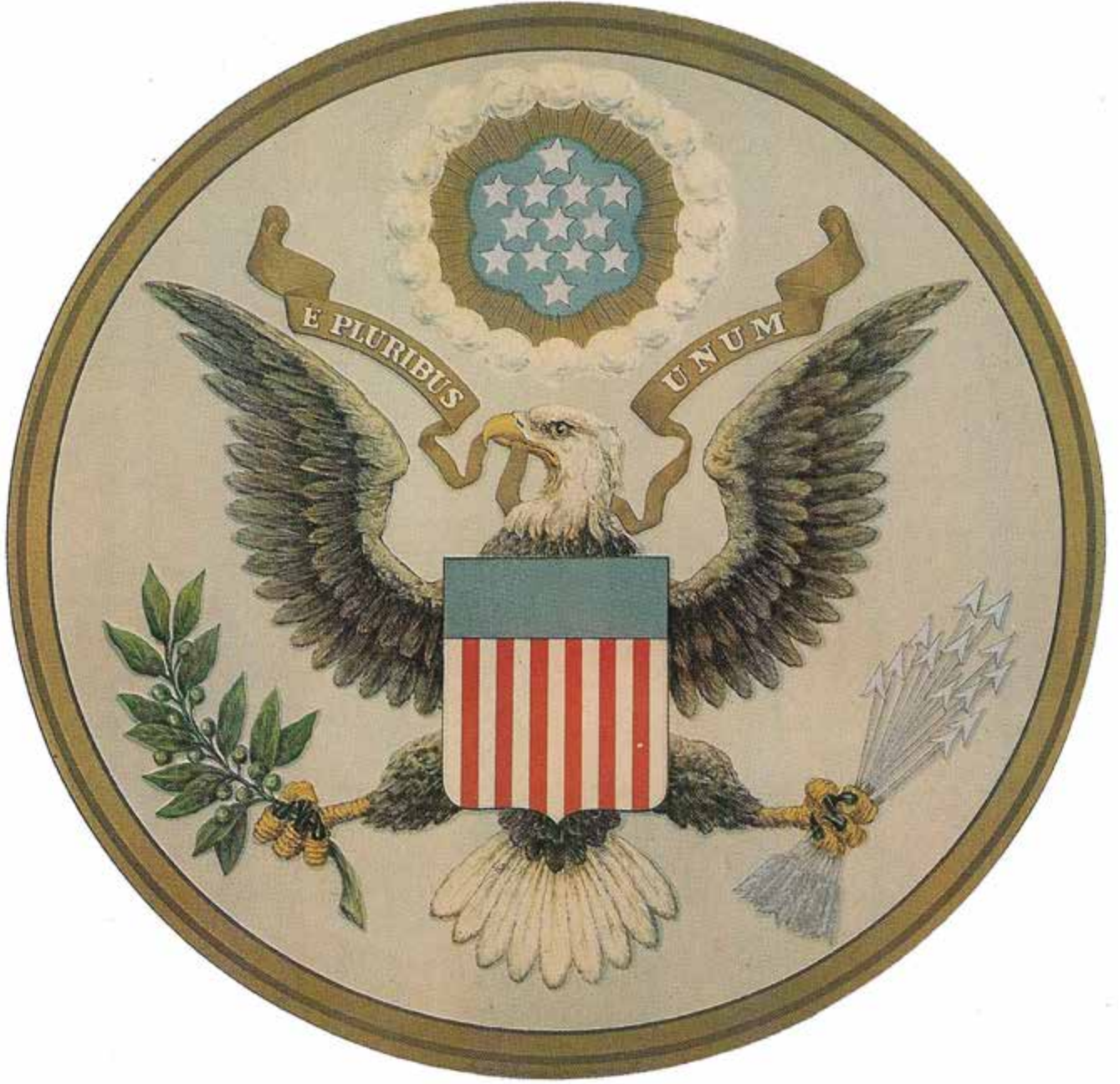


The eagle in US history

We have our own modern history with the Bald Eagle. The United States first adopted the Bald Eagle as its national symbol in 1782, depicting it on the Great Seal of America.

Many of our founding fathers revered the Bald Eagle. Thomas Jefferson said the eagle was "a free spirit, high soaring and courageous." The same did not apply to Benjamin Franklin, who wrote, "I wish the Bald Eagle had not been chosen as the representative of our country. He is a bird of bad moral character."

Interestingly, famed naturalist John James Audubon did not like the Bald Eagle either. He wrote, "They exhibit a great degree of cowardice. Suffer me, kind reader, to say how much I grieve that it should have been selected as the emblem of my country." However, on a trip up the Mississippi River in 1814, Audubon, apparently unfamiliar with the dark plumage of the juvenile Bald Eagle, misidentified one. Thinking he had discovered a new eagle species, he named it Washington Sea Eagle in honor of George Washington, describing it "the mightiest of the feathered tribe." Audubon clearly liked this new bird, but not the adult Bald Eagle. There is no record of his comments upon finding out the new eagle was just a juvenile Bald Eagle.



Get to know North American eagles

If you have a clear look at an adult bald eagle soaring overhead, identifying it is often relatively easy. But if you don't get a good look at it, you spot it perched at a distance, or you see a juvenile eagle, it can be hard to identify it. Here's an at-a-glance look at eagles, juvenile eagles, and their look-alikes.



Bald Eagle



Bald Eagle



Golden Eagle



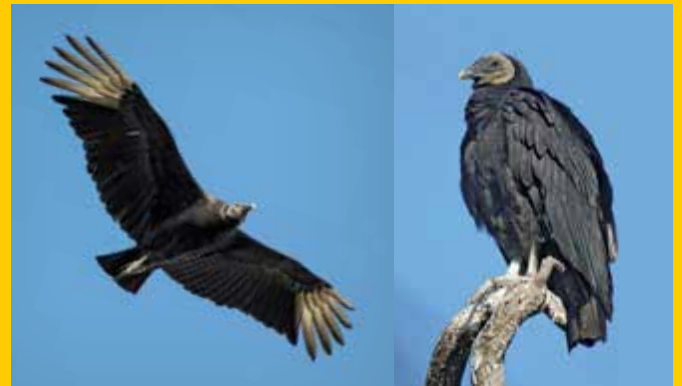
Osprey (not an eagle)



Red-tailed Hawk (not an eagle)



Turkey Vulture (not an eagle)



Black Vulture (not an eagle)



Where to spot eagles

Perch sites. These tall, often dead, trees offer an uninterrupted view of the terrain, making it easier for the eagle to spot food sources from a distance.

Nesting sites. Similar to perching sites, eagles are often seen near their nests, even when it's not breeding season; they do so because the nest site is often in a tall, protected space, and they often want to protect their territory from potential interlopers.

Near carrion on roadsides or in farm fields. Eagles are opportunistic feeders, and they'll feed on carrion, such as dead rabbits or deer on roadsides, or in farm fields. This can prove quite a surprise to motorists coming around the bend to spot an eagle just feet away.

Soaring overhead. This is no doubt how eagles are spotted most frequently; eagles soar for a number of reasons, not least because it's efficient and affords them a perfect view of the surroundings, enabling them to find food and monitor their territory.

Along rivers or bodies of water. In winter, eagles often stick around as long as there is open water, as this enables them to find food more easily; this also leads some places, including the Mississippi River Valley, to become eagle hotspots, where it's not uncommon to spot many eagles in a relatively small amount of space.

In surprising places. If there is a ready food source, such as at a fishing harbor or a garbage dump, you might find many eagles all at once.





Popular names

Through history, the Bald Eagle has also been called the Fish Eagle, Black-and-Brown Eagle, White-tailed Eagle, Washington Eagle, Washington Sea Eagle, American Eagle, American Bald Eagle and Bald-headed Eagle. It is now officially called the Bald Eagle.

Origins of the common name

Obviously, the Bald Eagle is not bald, but the white head and neck of the adult bird does give it a bald appearance. Appearing bald, however, is not the reason for the first part of the common name. Back in Middle English times, the word *ballede* was synonymous with “white” or “shining white,” not hairless. Either way, “Bald” in the name seems to be appropriate.

“Eagle” came from the Latin *aquilus*, which means “dark” or perhaps “the north wind,” which brought dark storms—together it meant “the black eagle.”





Origins of the scientific name

The scientific name of the Bald Eagle is *Haliaeetus leucocephalus*. The genus *Haliaeetus* is Greek and breaks down into *Halos*, meaning “the sea,” and *aetos*, translating to “an eagle,” referring to the fact that the Bald Eagle is member of the Sea and Fish Eagle group.



Range from coast to coast

The Bald Eagle is truly an American bird. In the right habitat, it can be found all over the United States. Its range spans across most of Alaska, through Canada to the tip of Florida, Texas, California and into Mexico. Bald Eagles in the southern part of the range tend to be 10 percent smaller than their northern counterparts, with shorter wings and 20 percent shorter tails. At one time in the past, these differences constituted a subspecies. Because populations of northern and southern birds were found to be intertwining, they were classified into one species—although juvenile Bald Eagles (as shown) are still sometimes mistaken for Golden Eagles.

Bald and Golden Eagles

Bald Eagles are not closely related to our other native eagle, the Golden Eagle. Golden Eagles are usually found far from water, often in mountainous regions, feeding mainly on rabbits, hares and other small- to medium-sized mammals. The Bald Eagle is usually associated with water, making its living by fishing and chasing waterfowl such as the Mallard. However, increasing populations of Bald Eagles have forced many other Bald Eagles away from water, to eke out a living on roadkill animals such as deer, squirrels and rabbits in less prime habitats.







Help from the Osprey

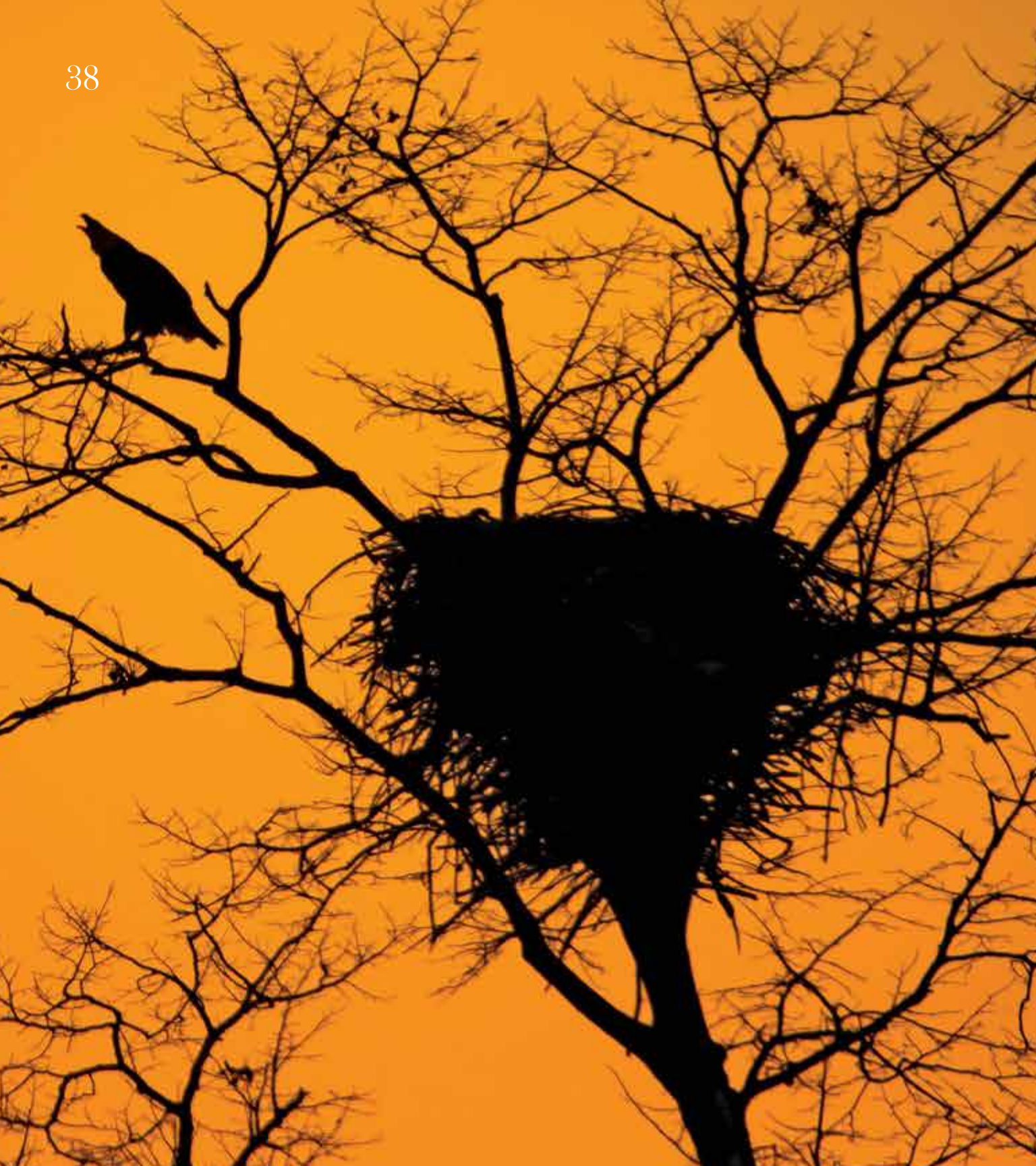
The reintroduction and subsequent increase of another native bird of prey—the Osprey—has inadvertently helped the Bald Eagle in some places. The Osprey is an expert at fishing, being one of the few birds to actually plunge into the water to grab a fish, and it is more proficient at catching fish than the eagle. The larger, more dominant Bald Eagle often will watch for an Osprey to catch a fish, then chase and harass the Osprey until it releases the prey, which the eagle snatches away and eats.

General population

The Bald Eagle presumably had stable, if not growing populations before European settlement. It is estimated that there may have been 500,000 Bald Eagles in the continental United States at that time. Back then, American Indians would have killed some eagles for feathers, but this activity obviously would not have impacted the overall population. One thing is sure—most American Indians revered the Bald Eagle and honored the ideals it represented, so it wouldn't be far-fetched to say that the decline of Bald Eagle populations didn't start until after European settlement. In fact, eagles were oftentimes shot by settlers who considered the bird competition for precious food. Other pioneers shot eagles, believing them to be bloodthirsty killers of other wildlife. Of course, this notion was unequivocally not true. Bald Eagles, such as these adults and juvenile, kill only to eat.







Returning home

Once the eagles reach their wintering grounds, they usually remain there for the rest of the season. At the first hint of spring, the birds return to their home territory, even before the ice melts from area lakes.

When young eagles reach breeding age, they abandon their nomadic lifestyle and often return to locations close to their natal range. Adults usually don't allow intruders into their territories, not even their own young, so newly mated young birds look for a territory nearby, usually within 10-20 miles. Some birds, however, take a mate far from their home range and never return to their birthplace. This helps mix the gene pool, ensuring a strong and healthy population of eagles.

The majesty of eagles

The majesty of the Bald Eagle has captured the attention of people for thousands of years. In the past, we regarded the eagle as competition for food and reacted by systematically killing it. We have poisoned the species to near extinction and, more recently, have come to regret the error of our ways. We have also, finally, witnessed the remarkable recovery of the Bald Eagle.

I would be hard-pressed to find anyone who doesn't agree that the Bald Eagle is, without a doubt, a majestic bird. I have spent countless days, weeks and years studying and photographing Bald Eagles, and I feel there is hardly a more photogenic bird on the planet. While my sentiment for this bird runs deep, I'm sure many of you feel the same. It is because of this widespread affection toward our national symbol that I am confident the future of the Bald Eagle will stay as bright as our nation and as wonderful as the people who care for this bird.





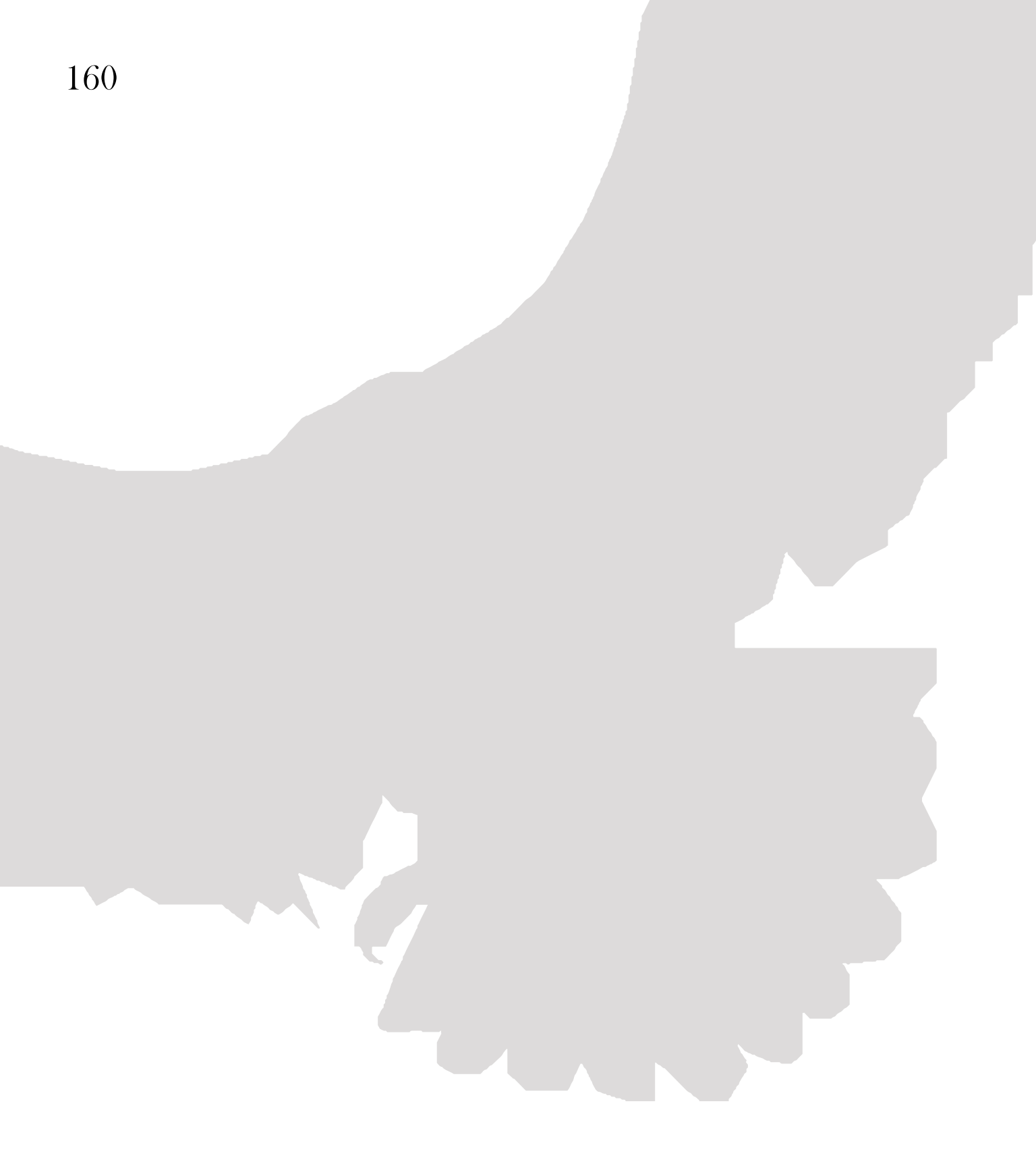




About the author

Naturalist, wildlife photographer and writer Stan Tekiela is the originator of the popular Wildlife Appreciation series that includes *Cranes, Herons & Egrets*. Stan has authored more than 190 educational books, including field guides, quick guides, nature books, children's books and more, presenting many species of animals and plants.

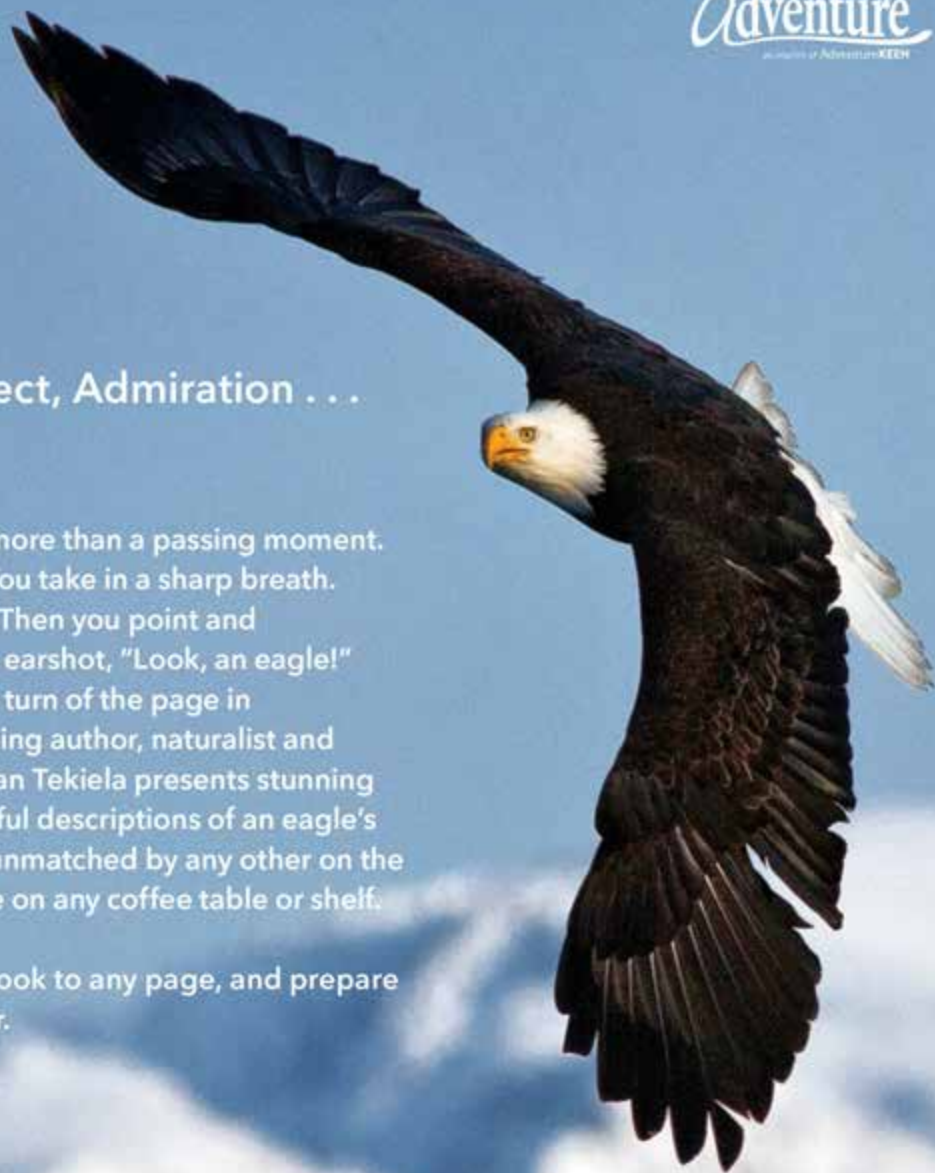
With a Bachelor of Science degree in natural history from the University of Minnesota and as an active professional naturalist for more than 30 years, Stan studies and photographs wildlife throughout the United States and Canada. He has received national and regional awards for his books and photographs and is also a well-known columnist and radio personality. His syndicated column appears in more than 25 newspapers, and his wildlife programs are broadcast on a number of Midwest radio stations. You can follow Stan on Facebook, Instagram and Twitter or contact him via his website, naturesmart.com.



Reverence, Respect, Admiration . . . the Bald Eagle.

A bald eagle sighting is more than a passing moment. You stop in your tracks. You take in a sharp breath. You gaze in amazement. Then you point and exclaim to anyone within earshot, "Look, an eagle!" Find that thrill with every turn of the page in *Bald Eagles*. Award-winning author, naturalist and wildlife photographer Stan Tekiela presents stunning photographs and insightful descriptions of an eagle's life. The result is a book unmatched by any other on the market, worthy of a place on any coffee table or shelf.

Give it a try. Open this book to any page, and prepare to be struck with wonder.



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