

# The Bald Eagle in American Culture

*James G. King*

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (retired), Juneau, AK

The emotions and symbolism Americans associate with the United States national symbol are traced through the history of our nation and world cultures. These associations have proven of real benefit to Bald Eagles and other species struggling for survival in a changing modern world.

United States citizens are surrounded by millions of Bald Eagle images. We find them as statues, as adornments on buildings, over doors, atop flag poles, on post office trucks, on stamps, on flags, on church lecterns, in art markets, on athletic trophies and on dollars and quarters in our pockets. No other bird or beast enjoys such prominence in our culture. Why?

The artistic record of man's interest in eagles goes back at least as far as ancient Mediterranean civilizations and cave dwellers in what is now Europe. In Greek mythology, Zeus had an attendant eagle that bore his lightning bolts in its talons. Ancient Roman legions were known by the eagle standards they carried. In early Christian art the eagle was associated with St. John the Evangelist, symbolizing divine vision and spiritual flight. Spiritual flight was demonstrated through the eagle's ability to get nearer God by soaring beyond human vision into the heavens above.

The eagle has often been a symbol of military power and triumph. It was used to adorn body armor and shields from the time of Charlemagne (about 800 A.D.) and in this heraldic form it became somewhat stylized and slimmed, with its wings and legs spread. The slender eagle was given a second head on emblems of Austria, Germany and Russia, symbolizing their power and influence to both the east and west of their borders. Napoleon Bonaparte decorated his palaces with eagle motifs and used them on his military insignia (Coumbe 1966). And so the eagle evolved in the Old World as a symbol of physical and spiritual power.

European symbolic eagles do not seem to represent a particular species. Sometimes, in fact, they are shown with a crest, which none of the European eagles have. And, of course, they were not Bald Eagles.

During these same times, however, the Bald Eagle had taken a similar place in the culture and ceremonies of North American Indians from the Atlantic to the Pacific. People worldwide are familiar with the classic Indian eagle feather headdress.

At the time of the American Revolution, official documents were generally authenticated

by "sealing" them with a drop of hot wax on which an engraved impression was stamped. Right after signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, the Continental Congress appointed Thomas Jefferson, John Adams and Benjamin Franklin to a committee charged with developing such a seal for the new nation. Various designs were



Adult Bald Eagle, our national symbol. Photo by Bob Armstrong.

proposed based on European heraldry and a six-year debate erupted. As we are reminded by the press every Thanksgiving Day, Ben Franklin thought the turkey a better symbol than the eagle, which he called a bird of "bad moral character" (Evans 1966), perhaps contributing to the delay.

On June 20, 1782, Congress finally adopted a design by William Barton modified by Charles Thompson (Evans 1966). This seal included an eagle purported to be an "American Eagle." It was a peculiar bird, skinny like some of its symbolic cousins and

with a crest. It was splayed out in an unnatural "spread eagle" position, its middle hidden by a large medieval shield with 13 vertical bars. The lightning bolts of Zeus had evolved into 13 arrows, representing the 13 colonies, held in the left talons. In the right talons was an olive branch, perhaps suggesting the spirituality of St. John or perhaps a symbol of peace. Near its head was a cluster of stars.

Peculiar or not, this bird became the symbol of our country. The symbolic eagle was improved in 1841 with removal of the crest and addition of a white head. It was modified again in 1902 to put a little meat on its bones. The shield, stars and arrows remain as you see them today on any dollar bill. Superstitions about the number 13, so frequently indicated on the great seal, do not seem to have detracted from the popularity of the dollar.

As time went by, our eagle cast off some of its earlier connotations and came to be considered primarily a symbol of American freedom. As such, the Bald Eagle has found a prominent place on postage stamps, coins, state seals, insignia, trophies and decorations of all sorts. In Alaska the Russian two-headed eagle can still be found on the cannons at the Castle Hill State Historic Park in Sitka and on various memorabilia in museums. Recently, when queried about the two-headed bird, however, Russian ornithologist A. A. Kistchinski told me, "I think it is extinct."

### **Eagle/Raven Logo of the Sealaska Corporation.**

The American Eagle carries on and is dignified in place names across the country. In Alaska, there are no less than 91 bluffs, bays, creeks, harbors, islands, mountains, points and other features bearing the eagle moniker (Orth 1967).

The living eagle has not enjoyed comparable popularity. For much of our history eagles tended to be lumped with the so-called "chicken hawks." They were often shot on sight by farmers, fishermen and "varmint" hunters in a misguided effort to protect domestic and more favored wild animals.

As people prospered and the nation's population increased-and as improvements were made in varmint hunting equipment-eagle numbers declined. In the West sheep farmers, who accused eagles of taking their lambs, learned to use poisons, traps and eventually aircraft in their vendetta (Green 1985). In Alaska, the Territorial Legislature maintained a bounty on eagles from 1917 to 1953 in response to fears by some fox farmers and salmon fishermen (DeArmond 2008).

Concern for declines in birds of many species began to develop about the turn of the century, leading to the 1916 Convention with Great Britain for Protection of Migratory Birds in the United States and Canada (Ossa 1973). The Migratory Bird Convention Act of 1918 excepted raptors. Eagles remained fair game until passage of the Bald Eagle Protection Act of 1940 and even that legislation excepted eagles in Alaska until it was amended in 1959.

The Bald Eagle Protection Act was amended again in 1962 to protect Golden Eagles and

to prevent any further losses to varmint hunters who could not distinguish golden from immature Bald Eagles. Other raptors were brought under protection by amendments to the Migratory Bird Treaty between the United States and Mexico in 1972 (Green 1985). But all was not right, much to the consternation of ornithologists and conservationists, who had led the campaign to stop eagle shooting. Bald Eagles responded by going into a sharp decline. Studies showed that the pesticide DDT, widely used since 1947, was disrupting reproduction in Bald Eagles and a number of other raptors by causing the birds to lay eggs with abnormally thin, fragile shells that broke under the weight of their incubating mothers. In the face of widespread national concern, the Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of DDT in 1972 (Green 1985).

By this time the Bald Eagle was an important figure in the debate over what to do about endangered species. Congress passed three Endangered Species Acts-in 1966, 1969 and 1973-each of increasing strength and effectiveness (Bean 1977).

Protection and restoration of Bald Eagles began in earnest under provisions of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. Research into eagle mortality soon disclosed a new problem, however: eagles were dying in significant numbers from lead poisoning, a result of preying on waterfowl wounded by hunters.

Figures 1-3: The symbolic eagle dominates the Great Seal of the United States and is featured in the insignia of a number of American Government and private agencies. The first seal is from 1782, the second seal is from 1841 and the third seal is from 1902.



Lead had long been recognized as a poison to waterfowl and efforts to develop and require a nontoxic shot go back at least to the 1960s. But resistance to the use of steel shot proved very strong in spite of the knowledge that 2 or 3 percent of all ducks in America were thought to die from ingesting spent lead shot (Bellrose 1964). In some places, where exhaustive study showed severe problems, steel shot was required by state action, but the struggle to ban lead shot nationwide moved very slowly.

In 1985 the National Wildlife Federation, because of the loss of eagles, filed suit under the Endangered Species Act to end the use of lead shot in the U.S. The federal judge ruled favorably and directed that use of lead shot for hunting waterfowl must end by 1991 (Gerrard and Bortolotti 1988).

In many respects, the Bald Eagle remains a symbol of individual liberty, not only to American citizens but to less free people everywhere and to a continuing stream of immigrants who fulfill their dreams by coming to this country. In addition, the Bald Eagle in America is evolving into something of a standard bearer for conservation and environmental protection. Other species, too, have benefited from public concern about eagles. Had there not been strong popular concern for the security of our national symbol, the protection of Golden Eagles and other raptors, the banning of DDT, the passing of effective endangered species legislation and the banning of lead shot might have taken much longer. Less well documented is the probability that human health has benefited from phasing out the environmental poisons that so nearly exterminated the eagles.

Mark Stalmaster (1987) suggested a growing sentiment when he wrote, "If the Bald Eagle returns, it will be more than a wildlife achievement: it will symbolize the growing concern and appreciation for life on earth." And the Bald Eagle is returning.

Our country has evolved enormously since 13 tiny, rural states adopted the Bald Eagle as symbol of their strength and freedom. This nation now leads the world in developing technology and solving associated environmental problems. Still carrying the image of strength and freedom, the Bald Eagle has assumed a new mantle as symbol of the power of free people to solve environmental problems.

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