

THE ISSUE: ARIZONA'S BALD EAGLES

Awesome — and still at risk



ARIZONA GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT

Against the cerulean sky, the winged raptor sweeps into view, gliding to a fat limb midway up an aging cottonwood tree on the bank of the Verde River.

It flares its wings and hits the limb with awesome power, then sits on its lofty perch like a sentry. Its yellow beak, white head feathers, piercing, creamy eyes and chocolate-brown wings, breast and belly leave no doubt: It's one of the few remaining desert-nesting bald eagles in Arizona, most of which nest in the watersheds of the Salt and Verde rivers.

No one ever forgets the inspirational thrill of seeing this majestic bird in flight or perched on a cliff, pinnacle or tree.

Their numbers tell a sobering story, however. And it's a tale that might not have a happy ending.

The Arizona eagles have staged a decent recovery. But victory certainly cannot be declared. Arizona's population has grown from 18 breeding pairs in 1985 to as many as 43 pairs today.

The story is vastly different in the rest of the United States. There, bald eagles have staged a remarkable recovery — from several hundred pairs in the 1960s to 10,000 pairs today.

Two key reasons account for this dramatic turnaround. The ban in 1972 on use of the pesticide DDT, followed by the 1973 passage of the Endangered Species Act that, in 1978, mandated that eagles and their habitats, whether on public or private lands, be protected.

All bald eagles have been downlisted from endangered to threatened, and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is under a court order to decide by Feb. 16 if the eagles should be declassified altogether.

Eagles still would have protections under the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act and the Bald and Golden Eagle Protection Act. But these two acts do not protect the habitat of

eagles. And a delisting of all the eagles could mean the neutering of special projects, like the Arizona Bald Eagle Nest Watch Program that conservation groups started in 1978 and has been credited with helping the recovery effort in Arizona.

Conservation groups in Arizona fear that the habitats for the desert-nesting bald eagles will be jeopardized by an eagle delisting. They want the Arizona eagles and their habitats to remain protected under the Endangered Species Act, and the Center for Biological Diversity and the Maricopa Audubon Society earlier this month filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to keep the Arizona eagle on the endangered list.

We, too, believe that the size of the population justifies continued endangered species protections, at least until a comprehensive status report can be completed. Forty-three breeding pairs hardly is indicative of a thriving, stable eagle population. For U.S. Fish and Wildlife to think that there has been a full recovery is foolhardy.

In spite of the mountain of concern expressed by conservationists and scientists, the Arizona Game and Fish Department supports declassifying the Arizona eagle. The agency looks to its past success in its monitoring under a state management plan and says it hopes there'll be the same level of commitment of its partners if the eagle is delisted. But that hope is tempered by budget reality if federal agencies no longer are mandated to protect eagles and their habitat under the Endangered Species Act.

At risk would be about 80 percent of Arizona's breeding areas. It might be left to programs like Nest Watch, which has had great success in saving eaglets and raising the awareness level. But it is worth noting that voluntary acts of kindness were not the impetus for the amazing turnaround in the eagle population nationally. It took legal mandates and protections.

Protecting our eagles and their streamside habitats matters. It is not too late for Gov. Janet Napolitano to get involved and use her bully pulpit.

The surest way to ensure continued recovery is to make sure a well-funded monitoring plan is in place and the habitats are protected.

Our Arizona eagles are headed in the right direction. It



ROBIN SILVER/CENTER FOR BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY

A bald eagle brings a stick to its nest on a cliff wall near Bartlett Lake. Arizona is believed to have 43 breeding pairs of eagles.

should not matter if it takes five, 10 or 20 years to significantly increase the number of breeding pairs. Their survival and continued recovery are what's important, not artificial deadlines.

The only eagles that live in the desert are Arizona's sparse population. Let's keep the protections in law so that future generations will have the opportunity to see these magnificent treasures of the Southwest in their natural setting.