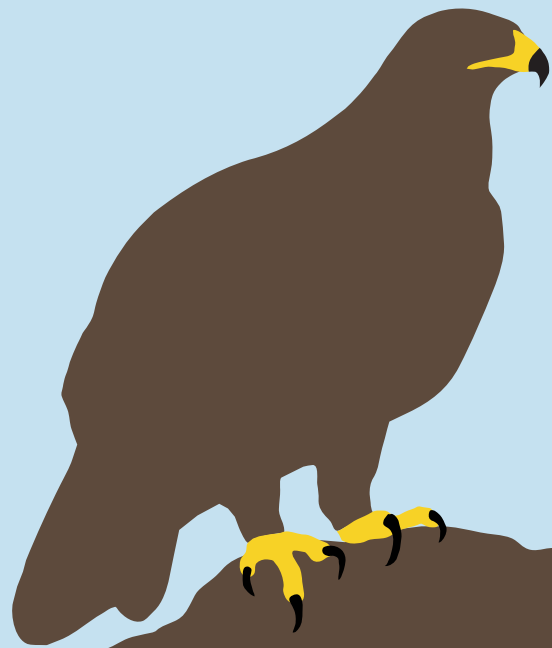


# The Obscure EAGLE

Golden eagle research expands in Kentucky

By **Kate Heyden**



ABRIENNE YANCY ILLUSTRATION

**A**LTHOUGH THE GOLDEN eagle is one of the most widely distributed birds of prey in the world – occurring in Europe, Asia, Africa and North America – it is rare to Kentucky and the eastern United States.

The birds that do come to Kentucky arrive in the winter, when the nesting population in eastern Canada migrates south.

There are currently no documented breeding pairs of golden eagles in Kentucky or the surrounding states. In fact, there has never been a documented golden eagle nest in Kentucky.

Biologists are now using camera trapping techniques to better understand the abundance and distribution of golden eagles in Kentucky and the region.

Camera trapping is a noninvasive and inexpensive method to survey for wildlife. Researchers set up motion-activated cameras in areas biologists believe will appeal to golden eagles and then use road-killed deer to bait the birds into view. This project is a coordinated effort with the Eastern Golden Eagle Working Group.

In 2011, Bernheim Forest Arboretum and Research Forest personnel began participating in the Golden Eagle Camera Trapping Project. This area of Bullitt County made a good choice since golden eagles have been regularly observed there for the past 20 years or more. For example, during an annual midwinter eagle survey in 2009, seven different golden eagles were spotted at Bernheim Forest. As golden eagles age, their plumage changes, allowing biologists to distinguish individuals of different age quite easily.

In 2012, camera trapping efforts expanded with the addition of sites monitored by biologists from Kentucky Fish and Wildlife. Camera traps were added at locations where golden eagles were suspected, but concrete documentation of the species was minimal: Grayson Lake Wildlife Management Area (WMA) in Carter County, Fishtrap Lake WMA in Pike County, Pioneer Weapons WMA in Bath County and Yellowbank WMA in Breckinridge County.

Surveys revealed golden eagle visitation at Fishtrap Lake WMA, Pioneer Weapons WMA and Bernheim Forest in 2012. Bald eagles were detected at Yellowbank WMA, Bernheim and Pioneer Weapons WMA.

Golden eagles are often confused with immature bald eagles since bald eagles do

not grow their characteristic white head and tail until adulthood. One way to tell the two species apart: Golden eagles have feathers all the way down their legs, whereas bald eagles have bright yellow, featherless lower legs.

Immature golden eagles are dark brown with white patches under the wings and at the base of the tail. Adult golden eagles are dark brown with a golden crown and neck.

Golden eagles are large birds, with a wingspan of about 6½ to 7½ feet and a weight of 7-14 pounds. They are long-lived and can survive 15-30 years in the wild. They obtain their adult plumage and reach sexual maturity at 5 years of age.

Golden eagles wintering in the east-

ern United States are often found in smaller forest openings or forest edges. Some people refer to them as upland eagles because of this habitat preference.

During the winter, they mostly feed on medium-sized mammals, such as rabbits, but they will also hunt for birds, rodents and occasionally reptiles. Golden eagles will also scavenge on carcasses and take waterfowl, which can associate them with groups of wintering bald eagles.

Kentucky Fish and Wildlife will con-



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tinue camera trapping efforts in 2013 at some of the same and possibly some new sites to gain more information about golden eagle distribution and numbers. More information about golden eagle research can be found online at [www.appalachianeagles.org](http://www.appalachianeagles.org).

Bird enthusiasts should not feed eagles for pleasure or in an attempt to duplicate this research. Trained biologists carefully planned this effort to avoid detrimental effects to the birds. Feeding eagles can disrupt their natural behavior and put them at risk of poisoning, collisions and other harm.

Although golden eagle sightings are becoming more common, a sighting of these birds continues to be rare and noteworthy. The best locations to see these birds include areas around Land Between The Lakes and Bernheim Forest. Winter months between December and February are the best times to see golden eagles flying overhead. ■

**Left: A golden eagle walks past the trail camera at Pioneer Weapons WMA in Bath County while an immature bald eagle arrives in the background. Bottom: Images from Fishtrap Lake WMA (left) and Pioneer Weapons WMA.**



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