

BOOK REVIEW

The Bald Eagle: The Improbable Journey of America's Bird, by Jack E. Davis. 2022. Liveright Publishing Corp. (W.W. Norton & Co.), New York. Hardcover, \$29.95. 417 pages plus 16 pages of color/B&W photos, 1 map. ISBN 978-1-63149-525-0.

This is a history book, a novel, a collection of short stories, a series of vignettes, an appreciation of nature, a reporting of detailed field and laboratory research, human-interest stories, and a narration in prose often verging on poetry. It's an enjoyable read, often thrilling, often depressing, always believable. I think it must contain everything there is to know or say about America's national bird, its history, its mythology, and its biology.

Of course, right at the outset, Davis points out that although the Bald Eagle is the centerpiece of the Great Seal of the United States, it is not our national bird. Unlike many nations, we have no official national bird because we never got around to officially naming one. It took Americans six years just to settle on the design of their Great Seal and its eagle. The book is filled with the myths, facts, depressing tribulations, and the recent successful return of America's Bird.

Primary among the Bald Eagle's tribulations were the rifle and DDT. People shot them for fun and because they were widely believed to carry away livestock and small children to feed their young. They were vermin and pests; bounties were paid. "By the 1930's, nesting bald eagles had gone missing in a dozen states." DDT was introduced and the decline accelerated; eggs laid did not lead to eaglets. Laboratory and field studies revealed that DDT caused thinning of the eggshell. Rachel Carson's *The Silent Spring* was published and DDT usage eventually dropped. The Bald Eagle, Brown Pelican, and Peregrine Falcon, among others, began to recover.

Before America became America there were probably 500,000 Bald Eagles across the continent. By 1963 they were down to about 500 pairs, a 99.8% drop. In 1978 the species was listed as threatened in 5 states, endangered in the other 43 contiguous states. By 2007 it had recovered to an estimated 9789 pairs. Humans took them down almost to extinction; when we stopped shooting and poisoning them, destroying their nests and stealing their eggs, then added captive breeding and release, they rebounded.

Why is it the "Bald" Eagle? It's obviously not bald like a vulture. Four possible explanations are offered: (1) The name comes from "piebald"—dapples of white against a dark color, which describes the immature plumage. (2) Stressing the "bald" rather than the "pie," "bald" is used—more often in prior centuries—to denote a large splotch of white, like the adult's head. (3) To someone with bad eyesight or with a bird far away, the white head might look bald. (4). "Bald" is synonymous with "flagrant," "blatant" and "brazen." The Bald Eagle is a brazen fish-thief, both from other Bald Eagles and especially from the Osprey, a far better fisher-bird.

The Osprey can dive deeper into water, rise up, and haul away a fish weighing up to 90% of its body weight. The Bald Eagle can at best hoist 50% of its own weight, but weighing three times as much as an Osprey offsets that disadvantage. It can fly off with a 3-pound piglet, but unless you have a habit of leaving your 3-pound premature baby lying on a blanket in an open field during the day, your children are safe. Myths about the bird were legion; field studies and unbiased reporting finally dispelled them. Mostly dispelled them, that is—people will still claim eagles have carried away their sheep. Neither a Bald Eagle nor Osprey can be drowned by hooking into a fish it can't release – another common myth. Their hind toe pierces the fish, the three front toes and talons keep it secure. The tendons in their toes have serrated sides that serve as adjustable stops. They can release their grip whenever they want, but otherwise "set it and forget it."

This sort of detail continues for 384 pages, in a friendly writing style that I admire

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but cannot replicate. Affectation is absent, facts do not smother one another, clarity is throughout. It's a pleasure to read.

The 16 pages of plates contain 47 color or black and white photos, usually three per page. The text does not mention the pictures. I wish it had, especially in the long discussion of the many iterations of design of the Great Seal of the United States which left me struggling to imagine what it looked like. The picture captions describe the photo, but not where in the text you might find more information. The 2/3rd-page map among the plates shows the many migration routes taken by Bald Eagles over the continental U.S. and Canada. It could have been larger and more usefully located at the front of the book. Perhaps a web link to an interactive map would be handy. It was believed for centuries that Bald Eagles do not migrate, another myth. Some do, some don't; it depends on the individual bird's circumstances.

The book is well constructed and if you want it for your shelf, it will endure. The 16-page folios appear to be stitched individually, then together, then lightly glued to the spine. Page edges are well cut. Overall, the construction is excellent. It's easy to read in bed, a major consideration for me. The paper easily takes pen, pencil, and colored marker.

The Notes section contains 470 references, presented in chapter and page order, not alphabetically by author or by title. Addresses and dates of web access are noted, useful because web-pages often change or disappear altogether without warning or comment. This format is easy to use while the book is being read (in bed). But searching after-the-fact for a particular reference's title or author is more difficult. You'd probably have to first find the text item, for which you'd use the index. Which brings us to another problem.

The index lacks detail. It has 505 headings over seven pages. By comparison, a history I'm reading of 385 text pages has 780 index headings, 54% more. Nitpicking? When I'd find something of particular interest—a frequent occurrence—I'd search the index. The item was rarely under my first three choices, and if found at all was under a heading I would not expect. If I searched for something in the index, a likely heading would often not exist. For example, "piebald" is not an indexed topic; look under "Bald Eagles: names and etymology," with 17 page references and you'll get there. That's not too bad. Want to know the population nadir and its date? It's somewhere in "Bald Eagle: population decline of" (18 page references), "Bald Eagle: population resurgence of" (13 pages), or "Bald Eagle: population size of" (8 pages). A great many people mentioned in the text are not in the index. The rule seemed to be: if a half-page or more of text concerned the person, he or she is indexed. Less than that, not indexed.

Many people never use an index. Those, like me, who do will find that the shortcomings of the index reduce the value of *The Bald Eagle* as a reference book or research tool. Other than this complaint, it's a terrific book, a wonderful and satisfactory read.

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