

Florida Shares Bald Eagle Population

By: Barbara Bobzin

Gainesville Relocating Florida bald eagles may help revive endangered populations of the national symbol, according to Dr. Michael Collopy, principal investigator for the Southern Bald Eagle Reintroduction Project at the Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS).

Now in its third year, the project has relocated 41 bald eagles from Florida nests to southeastern states having less stable populations of the bird.

The researcher estimates 1,500 bald eagles live in Florida, accounting for about 85 percent of those nesting in the Southeast.

"Florida has one of the largest populations of nesting bald eagles in the nation—ranking second only to Alaska," Collopy says. "For this reason Florida is becoming a focal state for bald eagle research."

The bald eagle reintroduction project is a cooperative effort between IFAS' Department of Wildlife and Range Sciences, the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission, Oklahoma's Sutton Avian Research Center and game and fish agencies from participating states.

Results of this research were presented at the Raptor Research Foundation's annual meeting Nov. 21-23 at the

University of Florida.

"Our goal is to fine tune methods of reintroduction," says Collopy. "Using solid biology and conservation, we hope to develop positive management activities."

Bald eagles lay eggs once a year, from mid-November through January. If the eggs are taken early enough in the nesting season—typically in December—the parents have enough time to renest.

The eggs are taken to the Sutton Avian Center where they are hatched and the fledgling birds are distributed to participating southeastern states. So far, Oklahoma, Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia have received Florida bald eagles.

The researchers hope to expand the project, releasing more birds to more states. "It is important to take protective measures now while we have stable populations and adequate sample sizes for research," Collopy states.

Miller Brewing Company and the Sutton Avian Center have sponsored the project. "Hopefully more agencies, both public and private will become involved in the future," the researcher says.

Today, the bald eagle's largest enemy is urban development. In Florida the problem is especially keen as bald eagles gradually lose their preferred wetland habitat to large scale development. "Most bald eagles cannot adjust to human disturbance," Collopy says. "While some can live in proximity to people, it takes a special kind of bird with the right disposition." ■

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