

Surrounded by so much contention in his lifetime, it is not surprising that the skeptical scientific community of the late 19th century, bolstered by the initial debunking of the Washington eagle in 1870, relegated this already exceedingly rare bird to the realm of inveracity (Allen 4:524-27).

Today, it is universally believed that the few Washington eagles that Audubon saw and expounded upon were not members of a previously unidentified species of eagle, but were rather a common bird known long to naturalists: the northern bald eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus alascanus*) in its immature state of development. Critics explain that Audubon was unacquainted with the geographic, developmental, and sexual-dimorphic variations in the Bald Eagle's size and the multiple plumages of its juvenile development (Durant et al 1988). While it is true that the immature stages of the Bald Eagle are generally brown, it would be hasty to unquestioningly conjoin the two birds without a thorough discrimination of their traits. And it would be unjust to such a noble bird, if it were to have existed, to brush it aside with so little ado.

To prove the Washington eagles were not immature Bald Eagles, it is necessary to show that the former's distribution, morphology and ethology lay outside the accepted range for the latter, especially those of its juvenile stages.

If indeed the Washington eagles were simply immature northern Bald Eagles, they should have been seen and noted quite frequently in Audubon's winter travels along the Mississippi, Ohio, and Missouri rivers. His river journals are actually replete with sightings of "brown eagles," but Audubon's writings demonstrate he was aware of Alexander Wilson's theory of the "brown" and bald eagles being the same species (Audubon 1929), and even noted for the uninformed reader that the term "brown eagle" is used "meaning the White-headed eagle (*Falco leucocephalus*) in its immature state" (Audubon 1999). The sole time within his 1820-21 journal that he references the then unnamed Washington eagle, the addendum "i.e. S. Eagles" [sea eagles] was added to the label of "brown eagles" to enable a differentiation. Here he noted that the "S. Eagles" he had seen previously—the Washington eagles—were "at least 1/4 longer" than the bald and brown eagles he was encountering on the lower Ohio River (Audubon 1929).

Unlike the abundant bald/brown eagles, Audubon had only five sightings of the Washington eagle in his lifetime. In chronological order, these were on the Mississippi and Ohio rivers near the cities of Grand Tower IL, Evansville IN, Henderson KY, Clarksville IN, and Mound City IL. The five sightings encompassed ten birds (never more than two adults in any one area), yielded a close observation of a mated/nesting pair complete with two nestlings, and resulted in the acquisition of one spectacular specimen.

Geographically, the Washington eagle was described by ornithologist Dr. Thomas Nuttall as a rarely encountered, year-round resident of the northern Great Lakes and a winter visitor to southern Illinois/western Kentucky (Bilby 27).

Ironically, it was near his residence in Henderson, Kentucky that Audubon, who claimed to always carry a gun, finally managed to bring a Washington eagle down as it scavenged at a pig slaughter. Audubon tells in his writings how he, like a schoolboy who stumbled upon a treasure, quickly wrapped the bird up and ran with it to the home of Dr. Adam Rankin. Rankin, who was described as a life-long resident on the Ohio River and an experienced hunter, proclaimed that "he had never before seen or heard of it" (Audubon 1999). Together they undertook a meticulous study of the specimen and recorded the following qualitative description:

Tarsus and toes uniformly scutellate in their whole length. Bill bluish-black, cere yellowish-brown, feet orange-yellow, claws bluish-black. Upper part of the head, hind neck, back, scapulars, rump, tail-coverts, and posterior tibial feathers blackish-brown, glossed with a coppery tint; throat, fore neck, breast, and belly light brownish-yellow, each feather, with a central

Figure 1: Comparison of immature bald eagle* to adult Washington eagle.

Bald Eagle Development	First Year A	First Year B	Second Year	Third Year	Fourth Year	Bird of Washington
Feature	Juvenile	Subadult				
Beak and cere	Black, gray	Black, gray	Black, gray, some yellow	Gray and yellow	Dull Yellow	Bluish Black beak, yellow-brown cere
Head	Dark brown to black	Brown	Brown to light brown	Gray and light brown	Dirty white	Dark brown to black
Breast	Dark Brown	Brown	Usually mottled gray	Brown, some gray	Dark Brown	Light Brown to yellow
Underside of the wings	Dark Brown, black, gray	Dark Brown, mottled gray	Brown, much gray	Brown, some gray	Brown, some gray	Dark grayish brown
Tail	Black with gray vein	Black with gray vein	Gray with black vein	Gray with black	Dirty white	Dark brown with black vein

*Bald eagle plumages from Stalmaster, Mark. 1987. *The Bald Eagle*. New York: Universe Books. p. 19.