

blackish-brown streak; wing-coverts light greyish-brown, those next the body becoming darker; primary quills dark brown, deeper on their inner webs; secondaries lighter, and on their outer webs of nearly the same light tint as their coverts; tail uniform dark brown (Audubon 1831).

This delineation and Audubon's painting that corresponds to it expose two significant anatomical anomalies that differentiate the specimen from the Bald Eagle.

1) The Washington eagle's cere is conformed in a manner unlike any known variation in Bald Eagles.

2) The uniform scaling found on the Washington eagle's tarsus is unknown at any stage of Bald Eagle development (Mengel 1953).

Audubon described the Washington eagle as being not only staggeringly large, possessing a wingspan of 310 cm (10 feet, 2 inches), eclipsing any raptor native to North America and matching that of any known worldwide, but also being brown in its feather coating—uniformly and without blemish. There are two known brown eagles in America today: the Golden Eagle and the immature Bald Eagle. Therefore, some have hypothesized that some of the birds Audubon labeled as Washington eagles were actually oversized Golden Eagles. That speculation, though, is undermined by the fact that Audubon was quite familiar with the distinguishing extended leg feathers of the Golden Eagle, which clearly reveal it to be of a genus separate from that of the sea eagle (Audubon 1831). The Washington eagle's preference for, and skill at, fishing clearly places it amongst the genus of sea-eagles rather than with the Golden Eagles (Audubon. 1999).

It is worthy of note that in Audubon's descriptions of his five sightings, there is no mention of any deviation in the birds' appearance or size. Because he penned his *Ornithological Biographies* entry on the bird long after his last sighting, it must be assumed that the eight adult birds he observed

were similar to the type-specimen he scrutinized.

Through their first four to five years of life, Bald Eagles undergo six distinct plumages. Two of these are poorly differentiated, are collectively known as the juvenile stages, and occur within the first year of life. Immediately following are four distinguishing molts in as many consecutive years, culminating in the well-known adult plumage (Gerrard, Harmata 1984).

The only Bald Eagle developmental stages that demonstrate any degree of superficial affinity to the Washington eagle are the juvenile plumages of the first twelve months of life (Figure 1). As American ornithology entered the 20th century, this similarity, coupled with an insistence that this stage of development can possess a wingspan "often a foot or more" greater in length than either of its parents, emboldened T. Gilbert Pearson to establish "misidentification" as the official Audubon Society stance on the Washington eagle (Pearson 1926).



*Second-year Bald Eagle photo courtesy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.*



*John James Audubon's drawing of the Washington Eagle is housed in the Smithsonian Institution.*