

Maine Eagle Identification

Maine Golden Eagle Study



Bald eagles and golden eagles are both native Maine species. Learning to distinguish the two is an important first step in contributing to eagle conservation as a community scientist. You might think that the bright white head of a bald eagle makes this a simple task, but it takes our nation's symbol five years to develop their iconic plumage. For this reason, juvenile bald eagles are often mistaken for golden eagles. Take a look at some key similarities and differences that will help you become proficient in eagle identification.



Juvenile golden eagle (left) vs. sub-adult bald eagle (right). Photo by Avianreport.com

Size and Shape

Body Size

- Golden eagles and bald eagles are about the same size, at about 2.5 feet tall with a 6.5 foot wingspan, and weighing about ten pounds on average.
- Females are 30% larger than males.
- Eagles from northern regions are larger than those from southern regions. Both can be found in Maine.
- Young eagles can appear larger than older eagles because new feathers may appear longer than feathers worn over time.

Head and Beak Size

- Bald eagles have a relatively large head and beak compared to golden eagles.



Bald eagle (left), golden eagle (right). Photos by Tricia Miller

Flight Shape

- Bald eagles hold their wings in a straight horizontal plane while soaring. Golden eagles soar with their wing tips slightly elevated in a dihedral shape.
- A bald eagle's silhouette in flight shows their larger head and shorter tail relative to the body and wing size while a golden eagle shows a smaller head and longer tail.

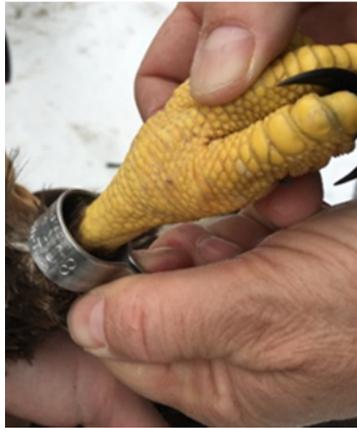
Habitat

- Bald eagles are more often found on the shores of lakes and rivers or on the coast while golden eagles often prefer upland habitats.

Plumage

Legs

- Although it may be difficult to distinguish as an eagle's legs and feet may not be visible, golden eagles have feathers all the way down to the foot but bald eagles do not.



Bald eagle

Photo by Tricia Miller



Golden eagle

Photo by Tricia Miller

Juvenile

- Juvenile bald eagles are uniformly dark except for mottled light highlights under the wing.
- Juvenile golden eagles are also dark except for a broad band of white at the base of the tail feathers, distinct white patches under the wing, and amber streaks on the head and neck.



Juvenile bald eagle

Photo by Benjamin Hack



Juvenile golden eagle

Photo by Elisa Dahlberg

Subadult

- As they develop, bald eagles show an increase in white mottling over the head, body, and wings.
- The white patches on the underside of the wing of the golden eagle begin to change to brown as a buffy wing bar develops on the top.

Adult

- By their fifth year, bald eagles are dark except for a sharply contrasted white head and tail.
- At four to five years old, golden eagles have lost their white tail band, and are dark with a buffy wing bar and amber highlights on their head and neck.



Female (left) and male (right) bald eagles

Photo by Laura Zamfirescu



Golden eagle

Photo by Randy Flament