

As fatal virus looms over bald eagles, NJ conservationists fight to keep the bird on the endangered species list

August 1 2024, by Frank Kummer, The Philadelphia Inquirer



Credit: Unsplash/CC0 Public Domain

The New Jersey Conservation Foundation, a major environmental group working within the state, is pleading with wildlife officials not to remove

bald eagles from the endangered species list as planned, saying a virus that's killing peregrine falcons will inevitably prove lethal to eagles.

In June, the state's Department of Environmental Protection said the bald eagle has made such a remarkable recovery that it was proposing to remove it from the state's endangered species list. There was only one nesting pair in the state in 1970. As of last year, there were 267.

But Emile DeVito, who wrote Monday to the state's Division of Fish and Wildlife, asked officials not adopt the change because of a highly pathogenic avian influenza (HPAI) that is striking peregrine falcons along the coast. DeVito is manager of science and stewardship for the New Jersey Conservation Foundation.

"The peregrine falcons are dying left and right," DeVito told The Inquirer. "And they are dead within 24 hours of showing symptoms. What we know about it from Michigan and Wisconsin is that it's going to be huge problem."

DeVito wrote in his letter, which was sent as a formal comment on the endangered species list removal proposal, that the HPA is "already serious and ongoing" and removing the bald eagle from the list would weaken protections.

'Actively discussing the issue'

Larry Hajna, a spokesperson for the DEP, said that Fish and Wildlife officials are aware of the spread and impact of HPAI on wildlife.

"It is premature for us to take a position regarding the potential impacts HPAI is having on our wildlife, including bald eagles, but we are actively discussing the issue and reviewing data," Hajna wrote in an email.

DeVito said he had learned of the spreading flu to eagles at a briefing of New Jersey's Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee. HPAI is a highly contagious disease known as [bird flu](#) or [avian flu](#), transmitted from bird to bird. It does not normally infect humans, but it has sporadically.

At the briefing, Fish and Wildlife officials said that 44 N.J. nesting peregrine falcons have been identified so far this year as falling ill with the disease and that 21 adults, or nearly half, had died. Losses were higher in coastal nests. The loss ratios are similar in Virginia and Maryland's Eastern Shore.

The New Jersey Conservation Foundation initially supported the state's removal of the bald eagle from the endangered list, which the peregrine falcon remains on. DeVito was on the Endangered and Nongame Species Advisory Committee for 25 years but recently left it.

"We shouldn't be delisting them now," DeVito said. "This is highly transmittable."

He said that the avian flu has already infected some eagles and that the birds get the disease while eating infected prey.

"It's not widespread yet," DeVito said. "But it's just starting to impact them. Chances are next year, there's going to be a big hit to the population."

Seeking public comment

The delisting of bald eagles is part of a larger rule proposal currently open for public comment, Hajna said. The bald eagle is just one of many species being proposed for either listing or delisting for various categories in a process that the state takes on sporadically. The public

can comment on the rule through Aug. 24.

If adopted, the rule would move the bald eagle from New Jersey's endangered species list and categorize it as a species of special concern. The bald eagle would still remain listed as a non-game species, meaning it cannot be hunted.

DeVito believes it would be easier to remove the bald eagle from consideration for now. It could then be reintroduced separately for delisting later if the avian flu runs its course.

Bald eagles have made a remarkable comeback nationwide since DDT was banned in 1972. They were removed from the federal government's endangered species list in 2007. Pennsylvania has also removed the raptor from its endangered or threatened list, but it is protected under the state's Game and Wildlife Code.

It was not immediately clear of the strain of avian flu that is striking [peregrine falcons](#) and bald eagles.

But the Centers of Disease Control reports that the HF or H5N1 bird flu, forms of HPAI, has struck nearly 10,000 wild birds across the U.S. in [wild birds](#), including bald eagles. It has struck at least 593 bald eagles since early 2022, according to an Inquirer analysis of the data. Two cases were logged in New Jersey this year in Mercer and Bergen Counties.

William Bowerman, a professor of wildlife ecology and environmental toxicology, wrote a letter "with urgency" to the federal U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in June, stating that he's studied [bald eagles](#) in Michigan and the Great Lakes for 40 years, and said his findings indicate the first regional population declines since the DDT era. Bowerman wrote that the decline is, "likely caused by" HPAI.

2024 The Philadelphia Inquirer, LLC. Distributed by Tribune Content Agency, LLC.

Citation: As fatal virus looms over bald eagles, NJ conservationists fight to keep the bird on the endangered species list (2024, August 1) retrieved 2 August 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2024-08-fatal-virus-looms-bald-eagles.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.