

# White-tailed Eagle photography from a boat



Information sheet for the project «Bird tourism in central and eastern Finnmark», a project part of «The natural heritage as a value creator (M)»

*The White-tailed Eagle is our largest bird of prey. With a wing span of up to 265 cm and a weight of up to eight kilos, it is also the largest bird of prey in northern Europe. In Norway the species is found along large parts of the coast, and recently also in some inland areas.*

After the White-tailed Eagle (*Haliaeetus albicilla*) became protected in 1968 following a long period of decline in the population, the species has increased considerably during recent decades. Today the Norwegian White-tailed Eagle population counts more than 2000 pairs, and is still increasing in the southern parts of the country. The species is found mainly by the sea or fresh water, which also reflects its choice of food. This consists mainly of fish, but also small mammals and water birds commonly occur among its prey. Carrion and prey that it steals from others, such as otters and large gulls, also form a considerable part of its diet.

The White-tailed Eagle becomes adult when about five years old. Then they find a mate and establish themselves in a territory where they remain throughout the year. They defend this territory against other eagles. Before becoming adult they are not bound to any particular area, and can wander over great distances, often together with other immature White-tailed Eagles. It is therefore not unusual to see large gatherings of young birds.

Normally 1-2 eggs (seldom 3) are laid at the end of March. The eggs hatch after about 38 days, and the young are in the nest until they are at least 10-12 weeks old and able to fly. This usually occurs in late June or early July, somewhat depending on which part of Norway where they nest. The nest is most often built high in a tall tree, but may also be placed on a rock ledge or on flat ground.

The species is rather shy and wary of human activity, especially in the breeding season, but in certain situations it is possible to experience the species at short



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range. Feeding sites have successfully been established where offal has been laid out which attracts White-tailed Eagles. A feeding site is a particularly effective way to watch and photograph the species in winter. An alternative to this is to attract the White-tailed Eagles to a boat by throwing out fish and fish offal, and in this way imitate what to a White-tailed Eagle is a normal hunting situation. In order to be successful one must take several factors into account.

The fish that are thrown out must of course float. This can be ensured either by deep-freezing the fish, or one can combine freezing with putting a cork in the fish before freezing it. NB! It is very important that this is a natural cork. The eagle will not swallow the cork, instead it will tear the fish into pieces, but gulls may swallow the fish whole including the cork. Gulls will however regurgitate the cork. The ideal size of the fish is 500-800 grams. If the fish is smaller then gulls may easily move the fish or swallow it before the eagle is quick enough to take it. If the fish is larger the eagle will be sceptical to descending to take the fish. Small coalfish and mackerel, or perhaps large herring, may be used.

Eagles that pick up the fish by the boat will always try to fly against the wind. It is therefore necessary to place the boat in the right position with regard to the wind direction. Most eagles seem to prefer a little "air" before them after having taken the fish. Therefore one

should avoid placing the boat in the direction that the eagle will take after picking up the fish.

Experience shows that it may take a little time before the different eagles become used to taking food that is offered in this way. Some may therefore be sceptical at first, and to be successful to get such birds down by the boat to take fish, it is an advantage to keep a good distance between the boat and the fish and to give the eagle plenty of time in the beginning.

A fixed routine should be followed during each trip. For example, the same boat should be used, the fish should be thrown at the same place, do not wave your arms, etc. Most of the eagles will gradually become more and more confident with regard to the boat and the routines.

The White-tailed Eagles' need for food is greatest when they have young in the nest. This is also the time when it is easiest to get them to come down to the boat and collect fish. A thorough mapping of the different territories and of the eagles is therefore valuable. Knowing the different breeding territories and where the pairs of eagles usually sit is a great help.

It is important to emphasize that one must never disturb nesting eagles. Always keep a safe distance from the nest site. Let the eagle come to the boat rather than steering the boat to the nest site. As soon as the eagles become accustomed to picking up fish beside the boat,

they will come even though the boat is many hundred metres from where the eagle has its resting site near the nest. There is therefore no reason to stay near the nest site. One should definitely avoid revealing the nest site to tourists or photographers. Unfortunately fauna crime is still a threat to our large birds of prey, and it is therefore better to be on the safe side and not to mention nest sites to people that one does not know.

Young White-tailed Eagles seem to be more irregular than the adults as regards coming to the boat for fish, but these often appear in groups. If one succeeds in attracting these to the boat one may experience several coming simultaneously. In order to attract their attention (this also applies to adults), it can be an advantage to have gulls around the boat. This is a strong signal that there is food available, and attracts the eagles' attention. Fish offal or bread crumbs ensure that there will be gulls around the boat the whole time.

This is a hobby that it is best to carry out during the summer. This time of year has the best weather conditions, the adult eagles usually remain stationary in the same area the whole time, and the nesting eagles have the greatest need for food. It is however also possible to carry out this activity during the winter, but then one can risk using more time in localising the adult territorial eagles, and the need for food is less among the adults which then have no young to provide for.



*Coalfish of about 0.5 kg corked with a natural cork and frozen. In this way one avoids having to provide fresh fish every time one goes out, and the cork causes the fish to float better in the sea.*

Winter may however give different kinds of photos, and at this time younger eagles are often easier to attract to the boat.



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*A catch! The eagle has picked up the fish and takes it in to land. Some eagles come repeatedly to pick up fish during the same trip, especially when they have young in the nest and the need for food is greatest. As long as there is some wind the eagle will always try to take off against the wind when it comes down to pick up a fish. One should therefore take the wind direction into consideration with regard to the relative positions of the boat and the place where the fish are thrown out.*

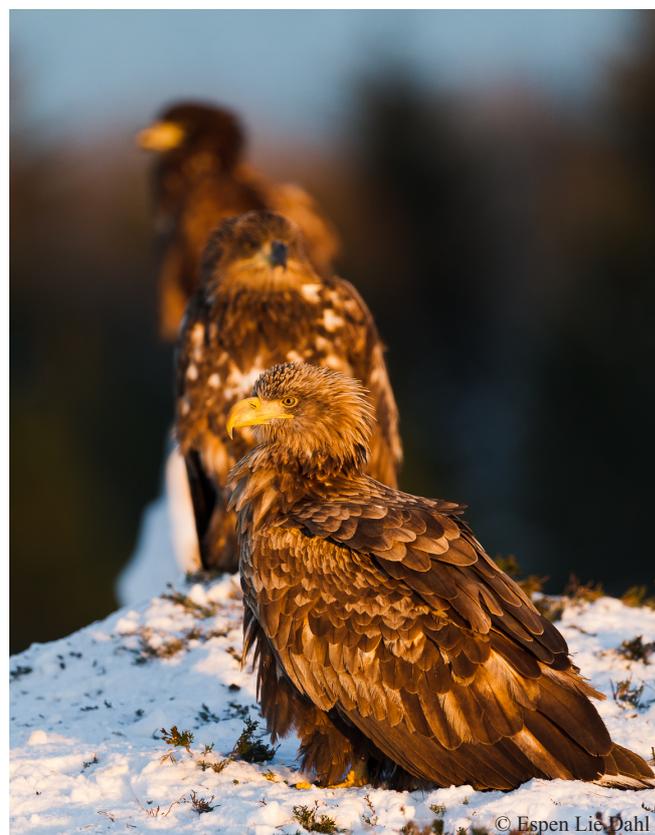


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*The fish are lifted into the boat again if the eagles will not take them. In this way one avoids the problem that the eagles may learn to wait until the boat has left before they pick up the fish.*



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