

Basic Eagle Identification

By Tom Salo

Illustrations by Dave Kiehm

Distinguishing between our two eagle species can be difficult. People who spend a lot of time watching raptors look for specific identification traits that make it possible to separate Bald Eagles from Golden Eagles. If you've ever found yourself puzzled after a large dark bird passes out of sight, remember these key questions to help identify these species:

Are you certain it is an eagle?

Where is there white on the bird?

Is the head more or less than half the length of the tail?

Is the profile flat or a dihedral?

More information can help clinch the ID.

Consider:

Other physical details.

The date.

The habitat.

The bird's behavior.

Are you certain it is an eagle? Dark Rough-legged Hawks greatly resemble immature Golden Eagles. They are smaller, lighter and hold their wings in a dihedral that levels at the wrist. Their secondaries and primaries show much more white underneath than an eagle. Both species of vultures are large black birds. The way Turkey Vultures rock in flight is very unlike a stable eagle. Black Vultures have light primaries and a very short tail. Study your field guide to rule out these species.



Immature Bald Eagle



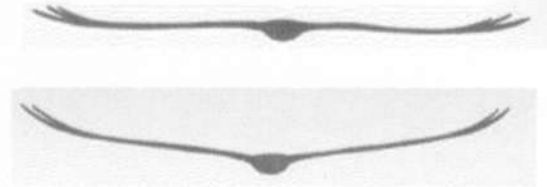
Immature Golden Eagle

Where is there white plumage? Adult Bald Eagles are obvious because of their all white head and tail. Birds with noticeable white on the body or in the wing linings are Bald Eagles. Immatures of both species can have a white tail with a dark terminal band. Birds with white plumage limited to the base of the tail and a patch in the flight feathers of the wing are Golden Eagles. Adult Golden Eagles have no white feathers of note (occasionally a small amount of white at the base of the tail or some small spots of down can be seen).

Is the head more or less than half the length of the tail?

Bald Eagles have large heads with large beaks relative to Golden Eagles. A rule of thumb for separating these species: if the head is more than half the length of the tail, the bird is a Bald Eagle. Golden Eagles' heads are about a third the length of their tail. Flying overhead, goldens present a shape similar to a buteo.

Is the bird's profile flat or dihedral? Bald Eagles soar on flat wings. Golden Eagles generally soar with their wings held up in a dihedral.



Bald Eagle profile top, Golden Eagle bottom

Other physical details: In good light, look for the iridescent gold head and nape that gives the Golden Eagle its name. If visible, a bare, scaled leg belongs to a Bald Eagle. Feathers down to the foot are found on a Golden Eagle.

Date: Bald Eagles are found in New York all year. Relatively large numbers will congregate in some areas in winter. Golden Eagles in New York are mostly migrants observed in mid-late fall and early spring. A small number winter in New York. Others may linger into early winter and depart when severe weather arrives. Golden Eagles are quite rare in New York from May to September.

Habitat: Bald Eagles are associated with open water. Golden Eagles are open country birds. Occasionally, individual goldens will be found among the Bald Eagles in the Delaware watershed in winter. Both species will travel long distances searching for food. When goldens are in NY, either species may be found where there is carrion, regardless of habitat. During the migratory period, goldens can be found perched or foraging in the open areas of upstate New York.

Behavior: Bald Eagles prefer the most efficient way of acquiring a meal-- often scavenging. Golden Eagles are more apt to be hunting. Goldens are regularly reported attacking turkeys in New York. Bald Eagles are often perched above rivers waiting for a morsel to float by.