

2009 Bald Eagle Nest Survey

Project Leader: Joel Jorgensen, Nongame Bird Program Manager, Nebraska Game and Parks Commission

Objectives: To document Bald Eagle nest locations and, when possible, determine reproductive success. Nest sites are evaluated to identify potential threats and to eliminate or reduce threats.

Activity: Bald Eagle nests were monitored by personnel from Nebraska Game and Parks Commission Wildlife and Law Enforcement Division, National Park Service, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Army Corps of Engineers, and Nebraska Public Power District. Several volunteers also monitored nests. Stephen K. Wilson, National Park Service, coordinated nest monitoring on the upper Missouri and Niobrara Rivers. The number of visits to each nest varied, but a minimum of two visits to occupied nests was made. The first visit usually occurred in March/April to determine if a pair of eagles was occupying the nest. Occupancy is defined as the presence of one or more adult eagles at a nest/territory during the breeding season. Monitoring was discontinued when a nest was determined to be unoccupied. If a nest was occupied, subsequent visits were made to determine if the nest site was active. Active is defined as a nesting pair engaged in breeding activity (incubation of eggs, tending of young) as opposed to a pair building a dummy or practice nest and not engaging in breeding activities. Active nests were then determined to be productive (fledging of young) or unproductive (no young produced). Personnel approached nests by vehicle, on foot or by boat, and monitored nests with binoculars or spotting scope from a distance that would not disturb attending adult birds. Observers recorded date, time, nest status, number of adults, number of young and relative comments during each visit.

Significant deviations: At the time of this writing, data from the upper Missouri and lower Niobrara Rivers has not been provided by the National Park Service, which monitors nests in those areas.

Results: In 2009, 43 nests were surveyed and 31 nests were determined to be active (Figure 1). It should be noted that information was not received for 14 active nests along the Missouri River; these nests are not included in this summary. Ten nests were documented for the first time after the 2008 nesting season or during the 2009 nesting season. Outcomes were documented for 25 of the 31 active nests in 2009; 24 nests were productive, 1 was unproductive, and outcomes were unknown for the remaining 6 nests. A total of 52 fledges were produced from the 25 nests with known outcomes. The one unproductive nest sustained damage from a blizzard and was subsequently abandoned during the nesting season.

The number of active nests decreased from 49 in 2008 to 31 in 2009. The number of nests surveyed also decreased from 58 in 2008 to 43 in 2009. Thus, the decrease in active nests is likely due to decreased survey effort rather than an actual decrease in active nest numbers. Even with decreased survey effort, the 52 fledges recorded in the state was only moderately lower than the 63 fledges in 2008 and comparable to the 58 fledges in 2007.

The fledge ratio for 2009 nests with known outcomes was 2.1 (Figure 2). In comparison, the average number of young fledged per active nest for the period of 1991-2004 was 1.6. The Nebraska Bald Eagle population is producing at a rate above the 1.0 young/nest goal identified in the 1983 Northern States Bald Eagle Recovery Plan. A total of 620 Bald Eagles have been produced in Nebraska since 1991. Over the past 22 years, Bald Eagles have constructed nests in 65% of Nebraska counties (n=93). In 2009, active nests were widely distributed across the state (Figure 3). There were no active nests documented in the region

west of Cherry County and north of the Niobrara River, or in the region west of Harlan county and south of the Platte River.

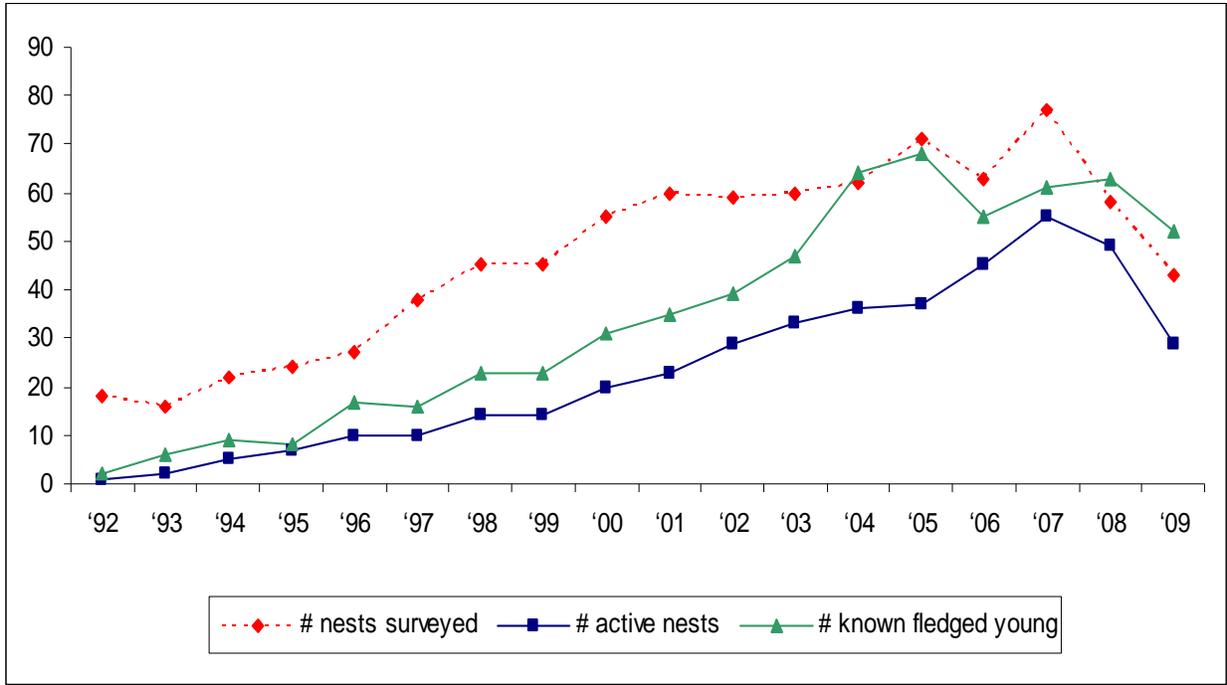


Figure 1. Number of Bald Eagle nests monitored (dashed red), number of active nests (dark blue) and the total minimum number of young fledged (green) by year in Nebraska, 1992-2009. It should be noted that graphic does not represent an actual decrease in nest numbers (see note under significant deviations).

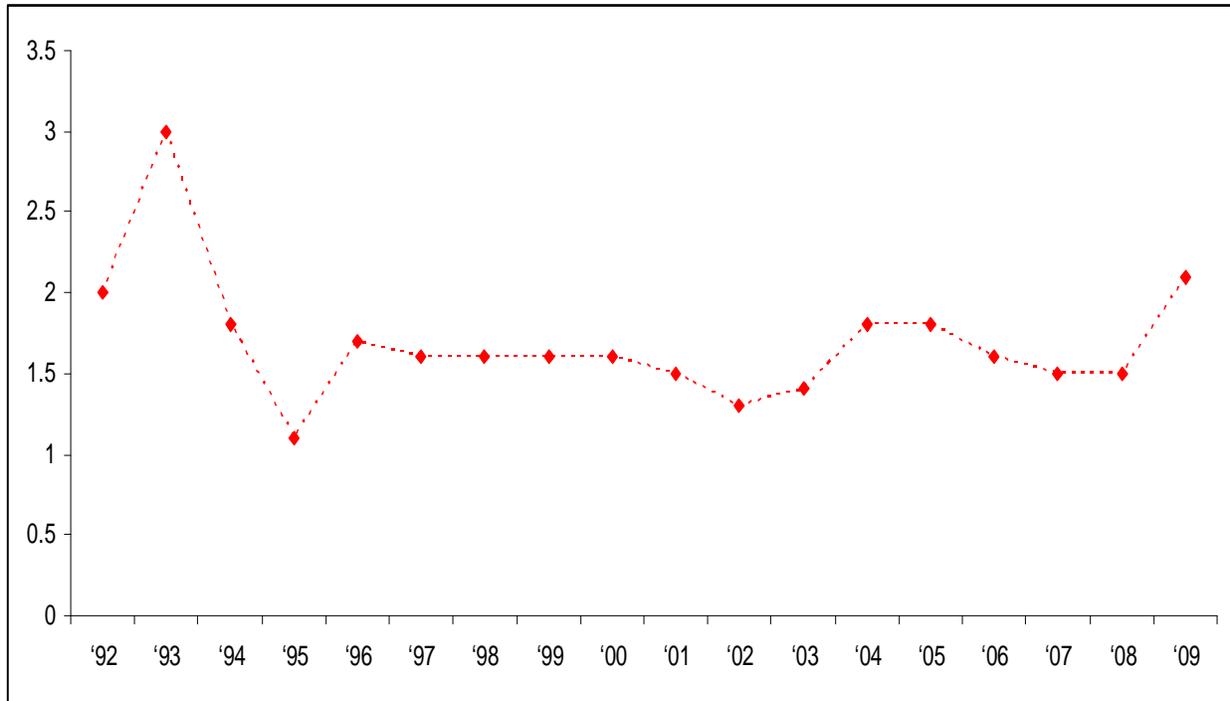


Figure 2. Average number of Bald Eagle fledges per active nest with known outcome by year in Nebraska, 1992-2009.

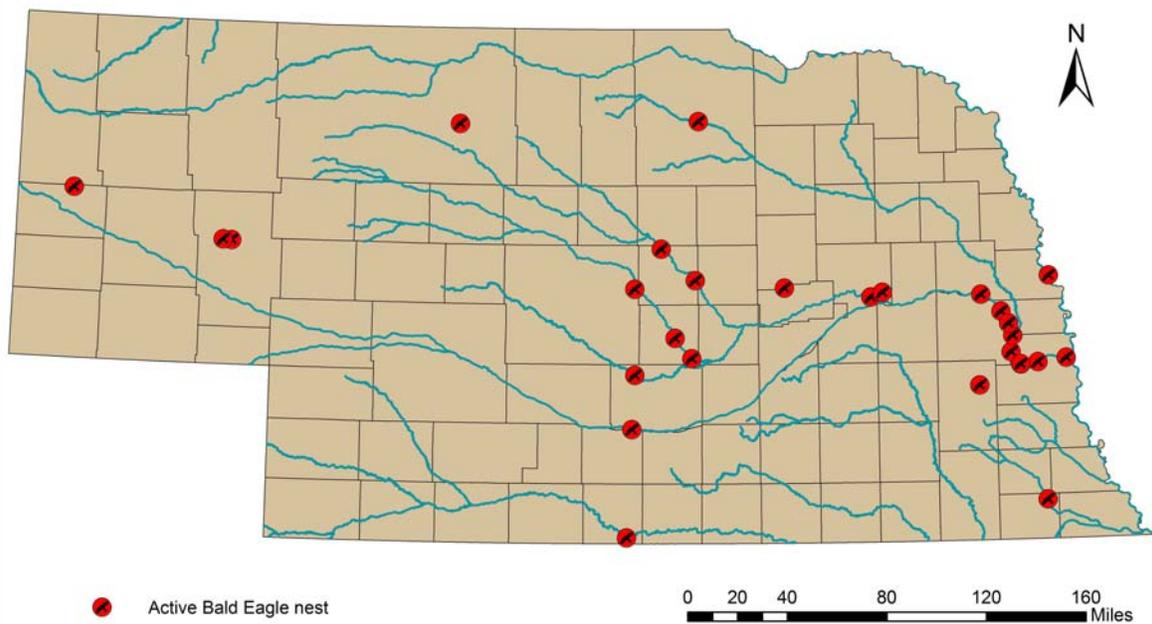


Figure 3. Location of 2009 active Bald Eagle nests in Nebraska.