

A POTENTIAL THREAT TO BALD EAGLES IN BAJA CALIFORNIA SUR, MEXICO

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The Southern Bald Eagle (*Haliaeetus leucocephalus leucocephalus*) is a resident species in the state of Baja California Sur (Grinnell 1928), occurring in mainly coastal habitats. Nesting is now known only from Bahía Magdalena-Almejas on the west coast (Henny et al. 1993, Amador-Silva and Guzmán-Poo 1994, Rodríguez-Estrella et al. 1995) where no more than three pairs are found annually. The physiography of Baja California Sur is composed of extensive plains and hills, the principal mountain ranges are the sierras la Giganta and la Laguna, and predominant vegetation is desert scrub, which covers 92% of the state area (INEGI 1995). Freshwater habitats are scarce and largely temporary across the state.

During bimonthly visits to the Sierra de la Giganta that commenced in June 1995 and continue to date, we have observed Bald Eagles on two occasions: On 13 April 1996 we observed two adults, and on 27 March 1997 a single adult, soaring over a canyon located at 24° 50' N and 111° 00' W (80 km west of Bahía Magdalena), at 250 meters above sea level. This canyon includes a series of permanent fresh-water ponds (locally known as "pozas") ranging in size from 35 to 100 m long and from 1 to 3 m deep. Unlike most other oases in Baja California Sur, these ponds contain abundant fish of at least two introduced species (*Oreochromis urolepis hornorum* and *Tilapia* spp.).

We have observed Ospreys (*Pandion haliaetus*) fishing in these ponds on several occasions and it seems likely that Bald Eagles may also utilize this resource, at least occasionally. Local informants report that fisherman occasionally shoot Ospreys, arguing that these birds take the fish they use for food. The hunting of Osprey is illegal, suggesting that fish-eating Bald Eagles could also be targeted, a potentially serious threat to the relatively small and vulnerable population nesting at Bahía Magdalena. Education of the fishermen in this area regarding the rarity of Bald Eagles in Baja California could be effective in helping to ensure the future of the peninsula's last remaining nesting population of this endangered raptor.

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