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Nationally, bald eagles have rebounded from 417 pairs in the Lower 48 states in 1963 to more than 6,400 pairs in 2000. Populations vary from state to state, with concentrations of 1,000 or more pairs in Florida, the Pacific Northwest, and the Great Lakes states. About 340 pairs live in New England, nearly all in Maine. Bald eagles were downgraded from endangered to threatened status under the federal Endangered Species Act (ESA) in 1995, but are classified as endangered under Vermont law and in its three neighboring states.

Bald eagles prefer to nest in large trees close to open water, so development near coastlines and river systems is the main threat to populations. “You need suitable land to establish a breeding population, so habitat protection is important,” adds Alferi. Vermont is creating a program to provide technical and financial support to private landowners for endangered species protection; similar measures have aided bald eagle restoration in Maine, where little land is publicly held.

Protecting critical habitat is a central issue in the ongoing congressional debate over ESA reauthorization. A draft bill by House Interior Committee chairman Richard Pombo (R-CA), which was leaked in July, stripped many of the law’s key elements—such as protection for areas that are essential to the recovery of a species but are not currently occupied by the species—and it specified termination of the act in 2015. Conservation groups have sharply criticized the



**Having successfully fostered populations of endangered peregrine falcons and ospreys, Vermont is applying those experiences to restore bald eagles (above, a chick in the Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area).**

draft and a revised version introduced by Pombo in September. The Senate Environment and Public Works Committee has held hearings on proposed ESA reforms, including incentives for private landowners. A bipartisan group of senators has asked the Keystone Center in Colorado to convene a stakeholder dialogue on critical habitat.

## And Vermont Makes 48

RESTORING BALD EAGLES TO THE GREEN MOUNTAIN STATE **BY JENNIFER WEEKS**

**THE BALD EAGLE’S COMEBACK** from near-extinction in the 1960s is widely cited as a conservation success story. In the latest chapter of this saga, Vermont—the only state in the Lower 48 that has no breeding bald eagles—is working to establish a breeding population there for the first time in some 70 years.

Since early 2004, the Vermont Bald Eagle Restoration Initiative, a partnership between federal and state agencies, conservation groups, and the state’s largest power provider, has raised and released 19 eaglets at Dead Creek Wildlife Management Area in the Lake Champlain Valley of Addison County. Baby eagles are obtained from rehabilitators and raised in eight-foot-square hack boxes built 25 feet off the ground, allowing the birds to acclimate to the outdoors with some shelter from the weather. Volunteers feed and

monitor them through one-way mirrors to avoid making them dependent on humans. Fledgling eaglets are released to the wild wearing numbered metal leg bands.

The goal is to have a self-sustaining breeding bald eagle population distributed across the Green Mountain state. Bald eagles generally return to nest within 100 miles of the area in which they fledge. This doesn’t occur, however, until three to six years after fledging, so the project’s impact is not yet measurable. “It’s definitely a waiting game,” says Amy Alferi, hack site coordinator for the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife. But conditions are favorable: Breeding pairs exist in the neighboring states of Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and New York, and a mature pair of eagles has been sighted nesting in southern Vermont, although they have not laid any eggs.