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The Bald Eagle Is (Finally) the National Bird of the United States

The bird of brown and white feathers has long represented the United States as a majestic and soaring symbol, but only this week did a law make it official.

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The bald eagle was named the national bird of the United States on Tuesday. Tony Cenicola/The New York Times



By **Sara Ruberg**

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The bald eagle received a title this week that many may have assumed it already had: the national bird of the United States.

For centuries, the bald eagle has been a ubiquitous symbol for the country, almost as recognizable as the American flag. The bird, with its bright yellow beak, long wingspan and beady eyes, has appeared at the center of “The Great Seal” of the United States since 1782, much to [Benjamin Franklin's ire](#) because he deemed it “a Bird of bad moral Character.” It has also been depicted on postal stamps, quarters and the insignia of most military branches.

But until this week, the bald eagle was only officially considered the national emblem. An act of Congress, signed by President Biden on Tuesday, declared [the bald eagle](#), whose genus and species is [Haliaeetus leucocephalus](#), “the national bird.”

The legislation, introduced by Senator Amy Klobuchar and Representative Brad Finstad, both of Minnesota, said the bald eagle is “a historical symbol of the United States representing independence, strength, and freedom.”

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The bird has evolved into a cultural symbol, representing sports teams and American clothing brands, and being written into movie lines and patriotic song lyrics. The spacecraft that landed on the moon during the Apollo 11 mission was even identified with the bird when the astronaut Neil Armstrong said, “The Eagle has landed.”

With the law’s signage, the bald eagle joins the same ranks as the bison, which became the [national mammal](#) in 2016, and the oak, which has been the [national tree](#) since 2004.

The bald eagle was once an [endangered species](#) in the United States, until 1995, [and was later removed](#) from the threatened species list, in 2007.

In 1940, as the bird’s populations dwindled, Congress made it illegal to kill, sell or own bald eagles, a prohibition that remains in place today. Harming a bald eagle, its nest or eggs are also illegal.

The protective laws and endangered species designation, as well as a 1972 ban on the deadly pesticide DDT, helped bald eagle populations thrive.

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Bald eagles are native to North America and can be found in almost every state, but they are most populous in Alaska, according to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. There were over 315,000 bald eagles across the contiguous United States in 2019, the [agency estimated](#), four times the population of the bird just a decade earlier.

Sara Ruberg covers breaking news and is a member of the 2024-25 class of [Times Fellows](#), a program for journalists early in their careers. [More about Sara Ruberg](#)

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