

Feature Story

United States Department of Agriculture • Natural Resources Conservation Service • 100 W. Capitol St.
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The bald eagle once nearly vanished from Mississippi. The loss of habitat and effects of pollutants reduced the bird's range severely. But with the help of landowners like T.W. "Rocky" Bond, the nation's king of the skies is reaching new heights.

"They're a beautiful sight," said Bond, who transformed 97.4 acres of cropland and another 143.36 acres of aquaculture (catfish farm) acres into wetlands using an easement program offered by the USDA's Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS). Now a pair of eagles is living on Bond's land, which was once farmland. "We're fortunate to have the opportunities we have here," Bond said.

Stories of the bald eagle on Bond's property in Humphreys County have become testimony for the effectiveness of the Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP) of NRCS. Since the program was introduced in 1992, NRCS has enrolled more than 150,000 acres in Mississippi. This totals 451 contracts.

Bond first started spotting bald eagles about a decade ago, and with time, those sightings became more common, he said. "We now have a good population in the area," Bond said. He said he hopes to see them continue to flourish.

"The bald eagle and Louisiana black bear have become a symbol of wetland conservation here in Mississippi," said Decunda Duke-Bozeman, Natural Resource Specialist (Programs) with NRCS. "May is Wetland Month, and we feel it is in order to celebrate our successes in wetland enrollment and restoration."

In 2002, Mississippi was home to 29 bald eagle nests. Now the number of nests has climbed to nearly 100, according to ornithologist Nick Winstead with the Mississippi Museum of Natural Science.

The banning of DDT and the preservation of habitat are main factors for those increases, Winstead said. The addition of more wetland areas has helped improve other biodiversity across the state, including increases in the state's Louisiana black bear troops. Across the nation, NRCS conservationists are remembering May as Wetland Month.

Wetlands support diverse populations of wildlife, plants and fish, and supply habitat for hundreds of species, including many listed as endangered or threatened. Often called "nature's sponges," wetlands help protect water quality by filtering pollutants and protecting towns and cities against floods and storm surges. Wetlands also buffer coastal areas from erosion. They offer aesthetic and recreational opportunities, as well.

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About WRP

WRP is a voluntary program administered by USDA's NRCS to eligible landowners to restore land to wetlands. If you think you have land that might be a candidate for WRP, contact your local USDA Service Center. To find your local office, go to <http://offices.sc.egov.usda.gov/locator/app?state=ms>.

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