



Golden Eagle Pointers

Golden eagles winter in the blufflands of southeast Minnesota, western Wisconsin and northeast Iowa. Although these elusive raptors can be tougher to find than bald eagles that also winter in the Mississippi River valley, taking the time in the right habitat and knowing what to look for can improve your chances. Here are some tips from National Eagle Center Education Director and Golden Eagle Project Co-coordinator Scott Mehus for finding and identifying golden eagles.

Distinguishing golden eagles in flight

- **Raptors seen in the winter months with a DIHEDRAL (V) should stop traffic!** That raptor could be an unseasonably late or early Turkey Vulture, wintering golden eagle, rough-legged hawk or Northern Harrier, all birds worth getting out to see! About 80 % of the time when I observe a Golden in a full soar I see it using a slight dihedral. Definitely not as pronounced as a Turkey Vulture's classic dihedral, but much more than the Bald Eagles' flat as a board profile.
- **Notice the almost headless appearance of a golden eagle.** Obviously it is not headless, but the projecting head is about one third the length of its tail and when compared with seeing a bald eagle overhead, which has as much head projecting out in front as there is tail sticking out behind, this gives the golden eagle an almost headless appearance.
- **Notice that wings pinch in at the body** along the trailing edge of the wing. This makes the secondary flight feathers bulge out and gives the wing more curvature, different than the unpinched straight plank like trailing edge of a Bald. This gives the impression of a very large and dark Buteo.
- **Tighter turning circle:** Another feature that gives one the impression of watching a large Buteo soaring overhead, is the tighter turning circle that a golden eagle makes. Bald eagles make a very wide circle almost like they are pulling a trailer making a left hand turn onto a roadway. A golden eagle turn is more red-tail like, still pulling a trailer on that roadway, but more like a camper versus a semi-trailer.
- **Lighter, Shallower wing beat** - When a golden eagle is observed flapping its wings, it will be unlike the deep, stiff and powerful flap of the bald eagle. This also gives the impression that the bird is lighter in weight. The motion of the flap is also shallower and centered at the wrist rather than along the whole wing, once again, reminiscent of a red-tailed Hawk.

Got a good look? Time to get the scope out?

- **Look at the nape of the bird for the golden color** from which the bird gets its name. The nape is located just below the crown of the head and ends just at the bird's shoulders. The color can vary from straw yellow to a whitish bronze and all age classes of golden eagles will have this color on the nape.

- **Observe the beak** - When observed up close or with a scope view the heavy, massive beak of the bald eagle should stand out. The golden eagle's beak, and profile, is much smaller and more hawk-like. While looking at the beak also notice that on the golden eagle the beak is dark on the outer tip and pale blue on the inner half. The immature bald eagles beak is all dark black and very large.
- **Try to determine the bird's age.**
 - **Adult golden eagle:** On all golden eagles over 1 year of age there will be a **tawny bar** (or light area) on each side of the birds back. It is very similar to the light colored bars seen on Red-tailed hawks, on both it appears as if the birds have been wearing a backpack for too long and it has worn and faded the feathers in this area of the bird's wing. This is a great way to determine whether or not the bird is a juvenile.
 - A **juvenile golden eagle's back will be all brown** with no tawny bars. Even though bald eagles may occasionally have some markings on the back, they will not be as precisely shaped and neat looking.
 - **Immature golden eagles have White patches under wing and White band in tail.** Immature golden eagles have distinct white patches under the wing and a wide white band in the tail. In contrast, immature bald eagles are mottled, and the white may extend into the 'armpit' and body. This is often easily seen in soaring birds.

Eagles in flight - underside

