

Arizona's nongame wildlife management helps grow bald eagle, and others, to record numbers

By Kurt R. Davis, chairman of the Arizona Game and Fish Commission

What's in a name? Based solely on its name, some might wrongly assume that the Arizona Game and Fish Department focuses only on "hunted" game animals and "fishable" fish. It's true the department is funded primarily by hunters and anglers, but Game and Fish also spends considerable time and resources conserving and recovering more than 700 wildlife species that aren't traditionally hunted or fished, including 46 threatened and endangered species.

Established in 1983, the department's Nongame Wildlife Branch was the first in the nation. Other states had yet to recognize the importance of dedicating resources to species that don't directly contribute to wildlife conservation funding. Because the cost of managing endangered species is considerably higher than managing non-listed species, it's far more effective to conserve species before populations decline and require listing under the Endangered Species Act. For example, the Mojave desert tortoise remains listed, despite spending \$100 million on its recovery since its listing in 1980.

Arizona continues to be a forward-thinking, national leader in nongame wildlife management. The department has more than 50 full time employees overseeing nongame species — from tiny spring snails to Mexican wolves to bald eagles — recovering rare species and keeping common species common.

Nongame Wildlife Branch's achievements over the years are impressive. Arizonans now have California condors, black-tailed prairie dogs, Tarahumara leopard frogs, Mexican wolves and black-footed ferrets where once there were none. Our nongame programs are conserving native birds, mammals, fish, reptiles, amphibians, and even invertebrates.

One of the most exciting nongame wildlife achievements is the recovery of the bald eagle. Finding this water-dependent bird in Arizona is a wonder in itself, but consider their exponential growth: when the species was listed as endangered in 1978, Arizona had only 11 breeding pairs. Now we have 56. A record 89 eggs were laid this year, up from 73 last year. This growth isn't accidental. It's a direct result of countless hours the department's nongame biologists and their partners spent in the field monitoring and surveying, rescuing hatchlings fallen from a nest, banding eagles to obtain and evaluate data, and implementing a nationally- recognized nestwatch program to protect breeding eagles.

Golden eagles are a more recent focus of the department as it works to keep this species common. Little historic information existed about their population and habits in Arizona, so Game and Fish kicked off a multi-year population assessment in 2011 that has so far identified more than 200 breeding areas. The information gleaned from countless days of field work will help conserve this species into the future.

Partnerships are critical to the department's nongame conservation efforts and successes, ensuring not only that Arizona wildlife remains vibrant and intact, but that management is cost-

effective. Game and Fish collaborated with multiple partners to develop a conservation agreement for the Sonoran desert tortoise that will help keep populations strong.

Don't let the name fool you. The Arizona Game and Fish Department is about more than hunting and fishing. Nongame wildlife conservation is an important segment of the department's work to ensure future generations can enjoy all the native wildlife we have today.