

*Tom Leeson climbs into a blind, nearly 80 feet up a tree, for a photo shoot of bald eagles, several of which have appeared on Air Force Magazine covers.*

# Covering Eagles

**Taking photos of the eagles seen on Air Force Magazine's May covers involves a precarious perch and patience.**

By Tom and Pat Leeson, photographers



An American bald eagle and its chick—photographed by Tom and Pat Leeson—first made the cover of Air Force Magazine's "USAF Almanac" 10 years ago. An eagle photo by the Leeson next appeared as the May 1997 cover to mark the Air Force's 50th anniversary. That image of a powerful eagle—wings in motion, talons sharp—proved so popular with readers that a Leeson eagle photo has been the cover of the May almanac every year since.



Based in Vancouver, Wash., Tom and Pat Leeson have more than 25 years of experience photographing everything from pandas to penguins. Their several books include *The American Eagle*.

Above, Pat Leeson gets close to eaglets in a nest. At left, an eagle has returned to its eyrie with food for a chick.

Preparation for such photos took months. In the summer, the Leesons searched for an appropriate eagle nest and found one on a lakeshore in British Columbia, Canada. That winter, a photography blind was custom built for them. They installed the structure—about 80 feet above ground in a neighboring Douglas fir tree—before the nesting season. After the chick hatched, they alternated in four-hour photography shifts in the blind.

From a photo blind (tan dome at left) on Kodiak Island, Alaska, the Leesons train their cameras on an eagle's nest perched atop the rocky point to the right. They spent two or three days slowly moving this blind closer to the nest. The rocky pinnacle gave the eagles some protection from predators. The Leesons, on the other hand, were buffeted by 30 mph winds, which caused the camera to vibrate and to cause the blind to collapse.





*On Adak Island, part of the Aleutian Islands chain, the eagles are somewhat more accustomed to humans because a naval air station is nearby. The familiarity allows Tom Leeson, above, to more easily find a spot close to a couple of eagles.*



*The eagles at this site often perched next to a clump of colorful wildflowers. At left, an adult feeds an eaglet. The female lays one to three eggs each spring. They hatch a little more than a month later, and the young are strong enough to fly at 12 weeks. Eagles add material to their nests year after year. Some habitations grow to be 10 feet in diameter.*

*Icicles on the Leeson camper prove outdoor photo shoots are not all sunshine and blue skies. Winter is the easiest time to photograph eagles because the birds tend to gather at a food source and spend more time on the ground or roosting.*



*Near Haines, Alaska, volcanic heat keeps the Chilkat River from freezing during winter. The Leesons say about 3,000 eagles gather here in late fall for the salmon run.*

*There are nearly 60 species of eagles, and the bird is found on every continent except Antarctica. Two kinds are found in the US, but the bald eagle is found only in North America. For this reason, the Second Continental Congress selected it as our national emblem in 1782.*

*The bald eagle became a part of Air Force heritage when President Harry Truman signed the National Security Act of 1947. The act created a separate Air Force and specified the eagle as an element of the USAF seal. The official language called for "an American bald eagle, wings displayed and partially elevated proper in front of a cloud."*

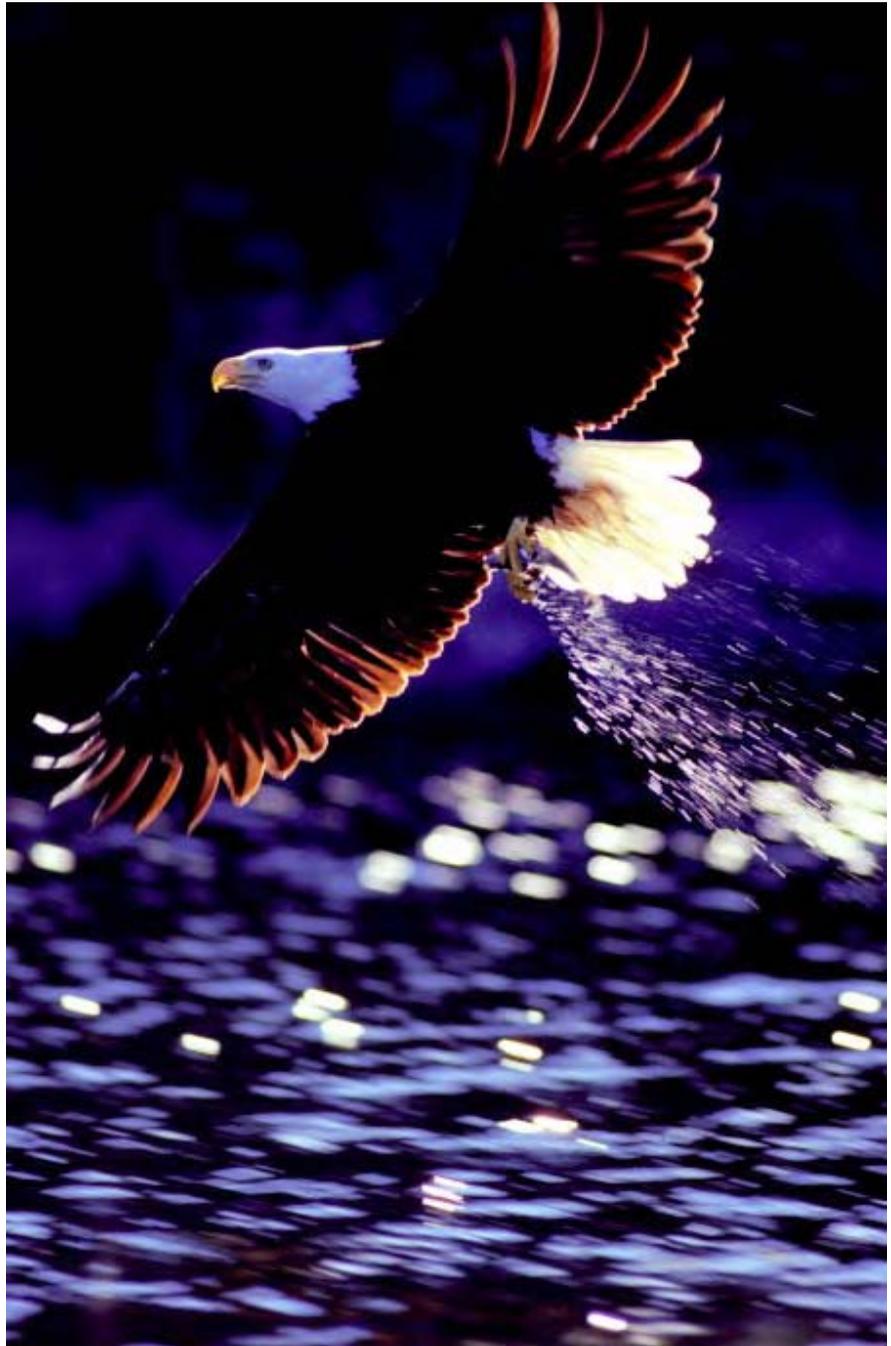
*The eagle at right was photographed near Homer, Alaska. Many eagles spend the winter at this site near Kachemak Bay, where a local resident has taken on the task of feeding several hundred of them every day.*



When the eagle became America's symbol in the 1700s, population estimates ranged from 25,000 to nearly 500,000. By the early 1960s, hunting, deforestation, and pesticides had reduced the population to fewer than 500 nesting pairs. Today, eagles remain a threatened species, but they have rebounded and can be found in all states except Hawaii.



Above, a bald eagle seizes a fish in its talons. "Eagle eye" is no exaggeration; eagles have eyesight four times better than humans and can spot fish in the water several hundred feet below them.



Pat Leeson, after looking through the collection of eagle photographs, noted that the magnificent raptor has been a major theme throughout the photographers' careers. The eagle—as an embodiment of freedom and power—has become an important symbol for USAF and a recurring element in Air Force Magazine as well.