

# THANKS TO CONSERVATION EFFORTS, EAGLE-WATCHING THRIVES ON THE DELAWARE

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**By Diane Stoneback | Of The Morning Call**

Seeing a bald eagle soaring along the silvery ribbon of an icy-cold river or perching majestically in the tallest branches of a tree along its banks is the embodiment of the freedom this bird has symbolized for so long.

It's probably just as inspiring as our founding fathers wanted it to be when they first selected the bald eagle for our national emblem in 1782.

But thanks to where we live and to conservation efforts that have paid off, viewing eagles stretching their wings doesn't have to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience in a far-off place.

You can see bald eagles flying high, swooping down to pluck fish from the water and casting an "eagle eye" over their territory from shoreline vantage points – all within a two-hour drive of the Lehigh Valley.

That's the time it takes to reach the Upper Delaware River Basin, which is one of the best and largest eagle viewing areas in the Northeast.

At the peak of eagle-watching season, from now through the end of February, you have a good chance of seeing the birds along the Delaware in the Lackawaxen area of northeastern Pennsylvania and northward to Narrowsburg, N.Y.

How good?

"People willing to commit four hours to visiting all four of our main viewing locations usually will see from four to 15 eagles when the weather is good," says Lori McKean, president and founder of the nonprofit Eagle Institute based in Barryville, N.Y.

Every winter, beginning in early December and ending in early March, bald eagles from Canada and the northeastern United States fly south from their nesting grounds. They seek forests near free-flowing water where they can hunker down in the trees when they aren't fishing.

The Upper Delaware River Basin is their kind of place. It has become the winter haven for 150 to 200 bald eagles from as far as 900 miles away. Another 20 nesting pairs make their year-round home here.

But before you pile the family into the car, check to see if there will be good weather – at least, from an eagle's point of view.

Log on to the Eagle Institute's Web site for weather along the Upper Delaware ([www.eagleinstitute.org](http://www.eagleinstitute.org)). If it's Friday afternoon (1–4 pm) or between 9 am and 5 pm Saturday or Sunday, you can call the



An adult bald eagle searches for a meal while gliding over the Delaware River. (Scott Rando, Eagle Institute)

organization's winter field office (570-685-5960) for a report on eagle conditions. "It should be clear and cold," says McKean. "That is when the eagles will be out all day long. They start feeding very early in the morning – at first light – and catch their last meals around 4 p.m."

The day I visited, mixed rain and snow were falling, so it clearly wasn't one of the eagles' good-weather days. Nevertheless, in the short time I was scanning the skies and shoreline, I spotted a lone eagle perched in a tree. At one point, he flew closer and perched in another tree.

"He could be as curious about you as you are about him," observes McKean as we stand on the center of the historic Roebling bridge (*designed and built by John Roebling, who also constructed the Brooklyn Bridge*) over the Delaware River.

We take turns using her binoculars for a better look at the bird and his view of the water. From this vantage point, we're only a short walk from the Eagle Institute's winter field office and visitor's center at Lackawaxen and the Zane Grey boat landing where the Lackawaxen River flows into the Delaware.

The best way to get the most out of your first winter visit is to sign up for one of the three-hour bus tours offered by the Eagle Institute or other environmental groups.

If that's not possible, stop first at the field office to watch a video, pick up brochures that explain more about the birds and ask questions of volunteers. They'll also have reports about where the eagles have been spotted that day.

Successful eagle-watching at the lookout points along the Delaware and two at nearby New York State reservoirs depends on your patience, waiting quietly and observing other rules of eagle etiquette, as well as being prepared for the outdoors.

Although it's extra cold and damp by the river, I'm prepared because McKean has tipped me off about the value of a hat, scarf and gloves as well as layers of clothing.

She adds, "You've got to be prepared for snow, ice and mud as well as frigid temperatures. Dress for the extreme cold to avoid hypothermia and pack warm beverages and snacks, because you'll need them if you're planning to be out for any length of time."

If you're going to take young children, pack toys and games to amuse them while waiting in the car for the birds to appear.

Although there are six eagle observation points, only four are staffed by volunteers.

Look for them between 9 am and 5 pm Saturdays and Sundays through the end of February at Lackawaxen in Pennsylvania and Minisink Ford, Mongaup Reservoir Observation Blind and Narrowsburg in New York.

The volunteers have binoculars and field scopes and loads of eagle information to share with visitors.

They'll give you the lowdown on the difference between an eagle "perch area" (where eagles spend 90 percent of their daylight time in the tallest branches of the tallest trees, from which they forage and feed), a "roost area" (where they cluster together at night and in inclement daytime weather) and a "nest area" (where eagles make their homes and raise their young).

Did you ever wonder how bald eagles got their name? Because their white feathers make them look bald from a distance? No.

The word "bald" is a derivative of "balde" which was an Old English word meaning white.

You'll get lots of other questions answered by the volunteers, too, like why some bald eagles have brown heads

(the young ones) and others have white heads (mature eagles that are at least five years old).

And they'll explain some reasons why these birds probably impressed the founding fathers and led them to overrule Ben Franklin, who favored the wild turkey for our national bird. The main reasons – their long lives (30 to 40 years, and as long as 50 years in captivity), impressive looks and great strength.

But they've got other strong points, too, like their "eagle eyes" that are much keener than ours and their speed (flying at 30 mph or more when cruising and even faster when pursuing their next meal).

McKean says about 4,000 visitors a year make their way to the observation points when volunteers are on hand. Still more stop by during weekdays when it's prime time for eagle-watching.

"We straddle a fine line between protecting the eagles and enabling people to see them," says McKean, who has been stewarding the birds for more than 10 years.

"We have to hope that our visitors will experience our education program and come to their 'a-ha' moment when they see these amazing birds and realize that they, too, have to help protect them. It means such basic things as conserving water use at home as well as making sure future land development protects eagle habitats and includes open space preservation," McKean says.

Although eagles were taken off the endangered species list in 2007, they certainly aren't out of the woods yet.

McKean notes, "We're facing some of the strongest pressure for development in 100 years right here in Pike County. It's the fastest-growing county in Pennsylvania, and the situation is similar across the river in Orange and Sullivan counties in New York."

She and her volunteers plan to continue their work indefinitely. She never wants to have to answer this question posed by a youngster who asked, after one of her talks: "Will the bald eagle still be the symbol of the United States if all of them have vanished?"