

VISITORS TO ILLINOIS EXPERIENCE AMERICAN WONDER;

BALD EAGLE WATCHING A WINTER FAVORITE

CHICAGO, IL -- On crisp, clear winter mornings in Illinois, visitors gather to catch a glimpse of the distinctive white head and tail feathers, piercing stares and immense wingspans of one of America's most prized possessions, the bald eagle. For years, bald eagles have chosen Illinois for their winter roosting sites, and eagle watching is increasing in popularity as an exciting and educational activity in the state.

On the brink of extinction since 1967 when Congress passed the first Endangered Species Act, the bald eagle has since made a significant recovery, evidenced in the June 1994 proposal by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to change the status of the species from "endangered" to the less dire category of "threatened." The recovery of the bald eagle, America's symbol since 1782, is a great success story throughout the country, and a source of great pride in Illinois. Strict law enforcement, habitat protection, public awareness campaigns and other conservation measures have resulted in a dramatic increase in the number of eagle nests in Illinois, making Illinois a premiere destination for the eco-tourist.

Known locations of nests dot the length of the state in 15 counties. Nests exist along the Illinois, Ohio and Wabash Rivers, and on several interior reservoirs, but they are primarily found in the limestone bluffs and woodlands along the Mississippi River which run the length of the state on the western border. These areas are the winter homes of an estimated 1,400 bald eagles. Two of the most popular places on the Mississippi to spot eagles during winter months are in Alton, near St. Louis, and the Illinois Quad Cities of Rock Island and Moline.

Eagle watching officially began in the Quad Cities more than 30 years ago. Although a small group known as the Tri-City Bird Club began eagle watching caravans in the late 1940's or early 50's, it wasn't until January of 1968 that the group gathered enough interest to form an official event. The first "Eagle Weekend" drew 150 out-of-towners and, in the 30 years since, has grown into the Midwest's largest exposition dedicated to our national bird. The "Eagle Weekend" is now attended by more than 12,500 aficionados.

The Mississippi River Visitors Center on Arsenal Island is another great place to learn about eagles and view them. Staffed by a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers rangers, the center features an eagle display, slide show and eagle photos for sale. On weekends in

December and January, the rangers offer organized eagle watches setting up viewing scopes and helping visitors spot the magnificent birds.

Heading south from the Quad Cities, a drive along the Great River Road provides plenty of opportunities to see eagles soaring over the Mississippi. As many as 75 eagles have been spotted along the stretch of road between Grafton and Alton in southwest

Illinois, an area that is the wintering ground for up to 450 American bald eagles each year. The Riverbend Eagle Tour, scheduled in January and early February, is a popular annual Alton event. These day tours include visits to roosting and nesting sites, an interpretive guide, lunch and transportation.

Alton and the Quad Cities may be the largest centers for viewing eagles in Illinois, but they are by no means the only ones. Additional locations for eagle watching include the Jarrett Prairie Center in Byron, the Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge in Carterville, the River Trail Nature Center in Northbrook, the Wildlife Prairie Park in Peoria, the U.S. Engineering Sub Office in Quincy and the Warsaw Chamber of Commerce.

Eagle watching in any of these areas can be an adventure in itself or the starting point for a wonderful winter getaway; Illinois is a diverse state, with attractions for people of all ages and interests. While in the Quad Cities, visitors can also take in the Black Hawk State Historic Site, one of the largest Native American centers in North

America, or enjoy concerts, sports and other family entertainment at the civic center, the mark of the Quad Cities. Alton boasts more than 60 antique shops for browsing in its antique district, or for a faster pace, visit the Alton Belle Riverboat Casino. In the many other communities along the Mississippi and throughout the state, there is an abundance of winter and year-round activities from which to choose. Touring historic sites, enjoying sports such as skiing or ice fishing, participating in special holiday festivities and taking advantage of famous Illinois hospitality in charming bed and breakfast inns are just a few of the ways to enjoy Illinois.

For more information on Illinois bald eagles or general travel state-wide, call the Illinois Travel Information Center at 1-800-2-CONNECT (TTY: 1-800-406-6418). Or, visit the Illinois Bureau of Tourism home page on the World Wide Web at www.enjoyillinois.com.

In the Quad Cities, brochures and maps of great eagle viewing

locations are available from the Convention and Visitors Bureau at 1-800-747-7800. For more information on Alton, and to make reservations for the Riverbend Eagle Tour, call 1-800-ALTON IL.

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The Illinois Department of Commerce and Community Affairs (DCCA), parent agency of the Illinois Bureau of Tourism, works to enhance the economic development climate for the citizens of Illinois.

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