

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Eagle Watching Soars to a Site Near You!

Illinois hosts the largest population of eagles outside Alaska in January and February; there are many great places to see them in flight throughout the state

Chicago (December 21, 2000)- Illinois is home to the largest population of wintering eagles in the continental United States, so dust off the binoculars, lace up the hiking boots, slip on a warm hat and gloves and get ready to embark upon an Illinois winter eagle-watching adventure.

Beginning in early January, Illinois will host more than 2,000 bald eagles that will use the state's natural river resources to refuel before embarking on their long voyage to Canada for the summer. Bald eagles flock to Illinois' open, unfrozen waters to satisfy their vast appetite for fish in January and February, when water sources in Canada have frozen solid. Locks and dams along the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers throughout the state provide exceptional fishing opportunities for bald eagles, who can consume up to two pounds of fish every day.

Once endangered, the bald eagle population is increasing yearly through conservation efforts. Winter in Illinois is the perfect time for travelers near and far to get a close-up view of America's majestic national symbol and most-beloved bird.

The following eagle-watching events and locations begin in the upper northwestern section of Illinois and continue south along the Mississippi River and encompass the surrounding communities.

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Quad Cities

Along the upper part of the Mississippi River, eagle-watching expeditions begin in the quiet, early morning at the Quad Cities' Lock & Dam #15. Take a leisurely stroll downstream from the dam and watch bald eagles catch their breakfast along the Davenport and Rock Island riverfronts, or look to the sky to find them perched high on the river bluffs. Learn more about eagles at the Mississippi River Visitors Center, located on Arsenal Island in the river between Davenport and Rock Island. Here the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Park Rangers offers educational eagle-watching tours and eagle-biology presentations three times a day during January and February. For more information on this program, please call the Mississippi River Visitor's Center at (309) 794-5338. Also in the Quad Cities, from January 6-7, the QCCA Expo Center in Rock Island hosts "Bald Eagle Days." The 16th annual event will feature birds of prey shows, environmental exhibits, wildlife art and outdoor eagle-watching opportunities. Call (309) 788-5912 for more information on "Bald Eagle Days."

Utica-Starved Rock State Park

East of the Quad Cities on the Illinois River lies Starved Rock State Park, another nesting ground for eagles. Known for its picturesque landscape filled with bluffs, canyons and ravines, this scenic park provides the perfect backdrop for winter eagle-watching activities. The Starved Rock Visitors Center offers an opportunity for visitors to learn about the area's geology and history before embarking on a mid-winter eagle expedition ideal for the hiking enthusiast. Climb to the top of one of the several overlooks including Eagle Cliff or Lover's Leap, where visitors are sure to spot a bird of prey in flight.

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For more information, please call (815) 667-4356. Open to the public, informational sessions at Starved Rock State Park on January 27-28 offer participants a chance to observe eagles in their natural habitat and in flight with the help of “super spotting-scopes.” Park rangers will be on-hand throughout the day to answer questions and to help locate these magnificent creatures. For more information on the “Bald Eagle Watch” program, call the Flock to the Rock 2001 hotline at (815) 667-4356.

Ottawa

Nearby, the town of Ottawa presents their own “Bald Eagle Watch” at the Illinois Waterway Visitors Center three times a day on January 27 and 28. See live eagle demonstrations by Wildlife CPR Rehabilitation Center staffers and learn where to look when scanning for eagles. High-powered “spotting scopes” and Audubon Society volunteers will be on-hand inside and outside to help visitors catch a glimpse of eagles fishing in the waters below the dam. Please call (815) 667-4054 for more information.

Grafton-Pere Marquette State Park

The Southwestern corner of Illinois is full of eagle-watching activities this season. Spend the day learning about eagles in Grafton from an on-site interpreter at Pere Marquette State Park’s “Eagle Days” throughout January and February. Start the day early at the park’s visitor center, where visitors are invited to attend an informative eagle presentation in which they will learn how to distinguish between immature and mature bald eagles, how bald eagles see and catch their prey, and why Illinois is an ideal location for eagle watching.

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Following the presentation, hop aboard the park's van and come face-to-face with an American Bald Eagle through high-powered "bird-spotting scopes" that are located in different areas throughout Pere Marquette State Park. The park boasts a spectacular view of the bald eagles soaring high above the bluffs overlooking the confluence of the Mississippi and Illinois Rivers. The Pere Marquette State Lodge will offer a special "Eagle Watchers" package for out-of-town guests traveling to spot the amazing birds. The package is available from January 1 – March 31, 2001 and includes a deluxe room for two, full breakfast for two and an "Eagle Souvenir Kit" for only \$79/night. Please call the Lodge at (618) 786-3323 for more information on their eagle-watching programs or to book accommodations.

Alton

Close to Grafton, the town of Alton is home to many spectacular eagle-watching sites and invites eagle lovers from near and far to venture to "Piasa Country" to explore the region where many eagles feed and rest during the winter.

Begin the expedition at the Melvin Price Lock & Dam #26, located on the Berm Highway, where eagles are often spotted soaring and delving into the open waters to grab a fresh meal. Just a short drive from the dam, bird watchers will find The Blue Pool Quarry on the Great River Road, a great spot to catch eagles perched high in tree limbs around the quarry's periphery. Following the path of the Mississippi River, plan a final stop along the boundaries of Calhoun County, where bald eagles wait in large trees near the water's edge, intent on spotting the perfect snack. For further information on eagle watching in Alton, contact the Greater Alton Visitors Bureau at (800) 258-6645.

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Madison

In Madison, the Old Chain of Rocks Bridge provides an excellent vantage point from which to view eagles fishing in the Mississippi River. On January 20-21, "Eagle Days" will feature a variety of activities sure to please any eagle watcher. The World Bird Sanctuary will host live eagle demonstrations and information sessions throughout the day and viewing scopes will be provided to assist visitors viewing eagles in their natural habitat. Please call (618) 874-8554 for more information.

Columbia, Ellis Grove, Chester

For those seeking bird-watching adventures in Southwestern Illinois and who wish to explore eagle country on their own, the Bluff Road from Columbia (in Monroe County) to Ellis Grove (in Randolph County) may be just the ticket to an eagle-watching expedition to remember. Traveling the scenic Bluff Road, visitors will see towering limestone cliff bluffs on the east and the dramatic expanse of the American Bottoms area, the original Mississippi River bed, on the west. Look for eagles in the places where they have been spotted in previous years: Fults Hill Prairie Nature Preserve, Fort de Chartres State Historic Site, Modoc/St. Genevieve Ferry (which crosses the Mississippi River), the Kaskaskia Lock and Dam and Fort Kaskaskia/Pierre Menard Home State Historic Sites. Continuing south, take Illinois Route 3 into the town of Chester which sits high on the bluffs and provides magnificent views of the Mississippi River and surrounding areas. Be sure to stop at the Turkey Bluffs Fish and Wildlife Area just south of Chester, a place where eagles often frequent.

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Marion

Further south, the Crab Orchard Wildlife Refuge in Marion offers two guided bald eagle-watching tours on the weekends of January 20-21 and 27-28. Tours depart from the Refuge Visitors Information Center and last approximately 2 1/2 hours, taking visitors through the grounds of the refuge. Space is limited on these tours, please call (618) 997-3344 ext. 334 for information or to make a reservation.

From family adventures to unique weekend getaways, Illinois offers eagle-watching activities for everyone. For detailed information on these and many other exciting things to do and see throughout Illinois during the winter months, or to plan a customized trip, call an Illinois Travel Counselor at 1-800-2CONNECT (TTY: 1-800-406-6418) or visit the Illinois Web site at www.enjoyillinois.com.

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

Editor's Note: For additional slides of Illinois eagle-watching sites and activities, call the Illinois News Bureau at 312/ 240-2605.