

Spanning the Gap

Eagles along the Delaware



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Spanning the Gap
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There are only a few areas in the Northeast where wintering bald eagles are found and, luckily, the recreation area is one of them. As lakes and rivers freeze up in the northern United States and in Canada, bald eagles that have nested and spent the summer in these areas move southward for the winter. They tend to

reach peak numbers in January and February, and usually leave the area again in April.

Mid-morning and mid-afternoon are the best times to look for eagles. Mid-morning is when eagles do their serious hunting, followed by a couple of hours of *loafing* in a favorite *perch-tree*. Mid-afternoon they take off again, sometimes to hunt, but more often they fly the air currents for what seems to be just the sheer pleasure of it. When you look for eagles in the afternoon, choose a bright sunny day when the thermal drafts will be strong over the ridges. The eagles may be visible, gliding above the ridge tops.

How do you know if you're looking at an eagle? The first thing to look for is size. Bald eagles are very large birds; they stand nearly 3 feet tall and have broad wings that measure 6 to 7 feet from tip to tip, so that even in immature eagles, the size is

(Left, top) A park biologist bands one of two eaglets from a nest in the recreation area in June 2004. Both eaglets were healthy and successfully fledged in early July.

(Bottom) A sub-adult bald eagle after tagging in winter. *(NPS photo by Warren Bielenberg)*



Mature male bald eagle at Poxono Launch NJ. *(NPS Photo by David Guiney.)*



Mature male bald eagle at Poxono Launch NJ. *(NPS*

noticeable.

The next thing to look for is the flight *silhouette*, the shape as the bird flies over you. The flight silhouette of an eagle shows long, very wide wings and a *widely fanned tail*. The flight *profile* of an eagle -- the shape as it flies directly AT you, is flat, the wings held out perfectly straight on either side of the body.

Adult bald eagles are unmistakable with their pure white head and tail. However, bald eagles don't attain their characteristic plumage until their fifth year. Until then, the immature birds vary greatly in appearance. They may be solid dark sable brown, or brown with white patches, sometimes so numerous as to give a mottled appearance, on breast, back and underneath the wings and tail. A good field guide can give you other clues to look for.



One last tip: ***stay in your car***. Eagles are very sensitive to human presence and will promptly fly away if someone gets closer than about 250 yards. Cars, on the other hand, don't seem to bother them. Your car will act as a blind, concealing you from the eagles' view and allowing you to watch them much more freely than if you were in the open.

If you do make a positive bald eagle sighting, note the date, place, time of day, and brief description of the bird (adult or immature, any noticeable markings for your lifetime birding record. There may even be a place to record your sighting at Kittatinny Point Visitor Center.

Photo by David Guiney.)



Immature bald eagle near Riverview trailhead, McDade Trail PA. (NPS Photo by Warren Bielenberg.)



Subadult bald eagle near Heller's Field, Route 209 PA. (NPS Photo by Warren Bielenberg.)



Bald eagle overlooking the river. (Photo courtesy of a park visitor.)