



# Eagle encounters *on the Fox*

## OPEN WATERS OF THE FOX RIVER VALLEY PROVIDE PRIME AREAS FOR WINTER VIEWING.

*Story and photos by Tim Sweet*

January is typically the coldest month of the year in Wisconsin, which naturally means more bodies of water covered in ice. Many hardy souls take to the frozen surfaces for winter fishing, but that doesn't work so well if you use your feet to snag a northern.

I'm referring to the feet — and talons — of bald eagles. To find access to the food they need in winter, these magnificent birds of prey tend to congregate around swiftly flowing water that remains open and ice-free despite a drastic drop in the mercury.

After recently retiring, I spent much of last January in search of bald eagles in my new hometown of Appleton and in neighboring areas of the Fox River Valley. Previously unknown to me, I learned from information provided by Eagle Days Along the Fox River that there are 16 established year-round sites for viewing eagles, from Neenah at Lake Winnebago northeast to Kaukauna.

### Sites to see

My first urban eagle encounter occurred as soon as I pulled into a parking lot next to Lock 3 in Appleton. An immature bald eagle swooped down into the channel near the lock, grabbed a fish and flew up into a large cottonwood tree to eat it.

I filmed and photographed the bird while it ate the entire fish. The eagle remained perched in the same tree for more than an hour, even while a train rumbled by loudly blowing its whistle. This is a spot I returned to frequently.

Lutz Park is another prime location to see eagles in Appleton. A viewing deck has been constructed that takes visitors right into the middle of the Fox River. I



**Angel, a rehabilitated bald eagle, eyes visitors during a naturalist presentation at 1000 Islands Environmental Center in Kaukauna.**

frequently have spied eagles cruising back and forth along the river here. They also can be seen perching in trees across from the park and in adjacent Alicia Park.

On one sub-zero morning, I walked along the Fox Trot Trail across the river from Lawrence University. Both adult and immature eagles flew along this narrow stretch of water in search of breakfast. This section of the trail takes you right under an eagle's nest next to the Lawe Street bridge and Neenah Paper Co.

### Robust recovery

Also in Appleton, the Paper Discovery Center is a museum found in the former Atlas paper mill in the heart of downtown. The parking lot by the river provides a great place to watch for eagles fishing or perched in trees below the dam.

I showed up at the center on the second Saturday of January to join Mike, a volunteer participating in a citizen science project that monitors American bald eagles along the Fox River. He and other

volunteers record information about the eagles they see along the river during a specified period. The survey data is turned over to DNR wildlife biologist Bryan Woodbury, who uses it to estimate the number of eagles spending the winter here.

According to the January 2017 survey, about 250 eagles were seen in the area. What a great testament that number is to the bald eagle's long-term recovery story.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has determined the bald eagle no longer needs coverage under the country's Endangered Species Act because the population of this national icon is "protected, healthy and growing." Information from USFWS notes that restoring more robust eagle numbers can be attributed to several actions: banning the pesticide DDT, widely used in the 1950s and '60s but found to be extremely harmful to eagle reproduction; prohibiting the killing of eagles and protecting their nest sites; and improving water quality of lakes and rivers to enhance eagle habitat.



The wingspan of a bald eagle averages 72 to 90 inches, and the majestic birds can soar at altitudes up to 10,000 feet with horizontal speeds reaching 35 miles per hour.

Young bald eagles like this one have not yet developed the distinctive white head and tail feathers and dark body plumage of their more mature counterparts, which happens fully by about year four or five.





With talons gripping its next meal, an eagle keeps a wary eye on the spaces surrounding its lofty perch.

looks to help educate the public about the future of her species. Thankfully, that future appears bright. ❧

*Tim Sweet writes from his home in eagle-friendly Appleton.*



Bald eagles are known to use the same nests year after year, adding material until the nests grow as big as 9 feet in diameter and 4,000 pounds.

### Birds of praise

I'm amazed and grateful to have eagles living along the Fox River, close to my new home in Wisconsin's third-largest metropolitan area. They are a joy to see and photograph.

The culminating event for my month of January bird watching came at 1000 Islands Environmental Center in Kaukauna, which hosted a presentation

by a naturalist from the National Eagle Center of Wabasha, Minnesota. We took three of our grandchildren along to see Angel, an American bald eagle found in poor shape 17 years ago, scavenging for leftover fish scraps on the ground in a heron rookery.

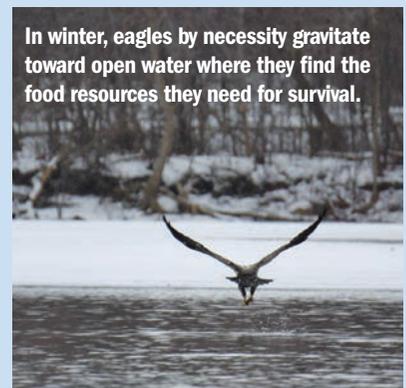
Angel never developed her flight muscles because of her misfortune early in life. Now, she uses her majestic good

## >>> EAGLE EVENTS

Eagle watching and related activities can be found in several Wisconsin communities where open water provides good winter habitat for American bald eagles.

- **Eagle Days Along the Fox River:** Events take place through January at several locations in the Fox Cities; [eagledaysalongthefox.org](http://eagledaysalongthefox.org). Also contact the 1000 Islands Environmental Center in Kaukauna; [1000islandsenvironmentalcenter.org](http://1000islandsenvironmentalcenter.org), 920-766-4733.
- **Bald Eagle Watching Days:** In Sauk County, eagles can be observed through winter along the Wisconsin River. The Ferry Bluff Eagle Council hosts its annual Bald Eagle Watching Days Jan. 12-13 and also plans eagle-watching bus tours in January and February; [ferrybluffeaglecouncil.org](http://ferrybluffeaglecouncil.org). Also contact the Sauk Prairie Area Chamber of Commerce; [saukprairie.com](http://saukprairie.com), 608-643-4168.
- **Cassville Eagle Watching:** Open waters created by power plants on the Mississippi River make for the perfect winter hunting grounds for eagles near this southwest Wisconsin village. Lock and Dam No. 10, Riverside Park and Nelson Dewey State Park are prime viewing areas. Contact Cassville Tourism; [cassville.org](http://cassville.org), 608-725-5855.
- **Alma Eagles on Ice:** Wings Over Alma Nature and Art Center on the Mississippi River hosts eagle viewing on its 50-foot deck from November through March each winter. The nonprofit center, 110 N. Main St., is located just below Lock and Dam No. 4 in Alma and offers free scopes and binoculars for visitors; [wingsoveralma.org](http://wingsoveralma.org), 608-685-3303.
- **Bald Eagle Appreciation Days:** Prairie du Chien, on the Mississippi River in southwest Wisconsin, holds its annual Bald Eagle Appreciation Days Feb. 23-24, with a number of free activities. Visitors also can view eagles throughout winter at areas of open water, with good viewing sites at the Prairie du Chien Regional Tourism Center, 211 S. Main St., and on St. Feriole Island. Contact the Prairie du Chien Area Chamber of Commerce; [prairieduchien.org](http://prairieduchien.org), 800-732-1673.
- **Bald Eagle Day:** Ferryville, on the Mississippi River midway between La Crosse and Prairie du Chien, welcomes visitors for a day full of eagle-related programming on March 3 at the Ferryville Community Center, 170 Pine St. Presenters include the University of Minnesota's Raptor Center and the Raptor Resource Project of Decorah, Iowa. Contact the Ferryville Tourism Council; [visitferryville.com](http://visitferryville.com), 608-734-9077.

— Andrea Zani



In winter, eagles by necessity gravitate toward open water where they find the food resources they need for survival.