



If you live anywhere around the Mississippi river valley, you have probably read articles about viewing the wintering eagles. Perhaps, like me, you said to yourself, “We need to do that some time.” This year, we did! Before I go any further, let me post this warning: The quest for the Bald Eagle may become compulsive! If you are a photographer, this is doubly dangerous, because you not only feel the urge to continually go out and get a better view, but you feel the need to get that better picture. This can lead to equipment purchases that normally might be spread out over several years. It is a little like compulsive gambling, where you have to go one more hand or one more roll to hit the mother load. As a compulsive eagle watcher, you are looking for that one perfect view or picture. All that said, the rewards far outnumber the cautions.

It was an unusually warm January morning. We had the Jeep loaded with bottled water and soft drinks to help offset the expense of eating out. An Illinois map was open to the west central section and the laptop computer was firmly anchored to the front console and attached to the GPS unit. My fairly new digital camera was lying on the back seat with a fully charged battery and a 1 gig memory chip. To the non-photographer, this translates to, “I was ready to take over 400 pictures.” My camera had a zoom lens capable of magnifying an object 7 times. This is comparable to a low end pair of binoculars. My wife was at my side with a map and miscellaneous printouts from the internet. All we needed were some goofy hats and we could have been ready to make a Chevy Chase vacation movie.

We headed west out of Springfield toward Meredosia. They had advertised an eagle watch weekend, so we figured surely there would be eagles there. In retrospect, I have to wonder how they knew when they were planning this town money maker that the eagles would come. Perhaps the eagles saw it on the internet, because sure enough as we crossed the bridge, there sat a regal eagle in a nearby tree to my right through the passenger



window. Now, I can eat and drive, even if it requires a fork or spoon, and have even been known to take movies while driving across a bridge, but, getting a picture of an eagle in a tree a hundred yards away using a telephoto lens through the passenger window was beyond me, even in my prime, and now at almost 60, I’m not nearly so flexible. I had to store the picture in my memory and keep on driving. We pulled into the next road and turned around. Wondering if the eagle would still be there, I pulled back onto the highway.

With my camera turned on and in hand, we headed back across the bridge. What luck, there the eagle sat in the same tree. This time it was on my side of the car, so I clicked off

a couple images hoping the focus would be right. We got across the bridge and saw the official eagle watching headquarters. An “open sign” greeted us. So did a locked door! Like little kids at a toy store window, we tried to see inside for signs of life. Obviously, the “open sign” was the only thing there to greet us. We turned around to head back across the bridge. This time, I sat in the passenger seat with camera ready, as my wife slowly crept across the bridge. The eagle was still there in the same tree, and I got what I thought would be good pictures. Looking at the motionless rapture, I had to wonder if he could be as lifeless as the “open sign”. I wondered if he were just a stuffed exhibit there for the tourists. But lifeless or not, he was in his natural environment and I was going to take my pictures. We turned around at the same road and headed back across the bridge. This time I had squeezed my opulent torso through the open sunroof and was ready to click away. All I needed was a red scarf and goggles, and I could have made a good Red Barron flying through the sky. This was great and we were hooked! We had seen an eagle in the wild for the first time.

We journeyed north along the Illinois River and explored every river’s edge road we could see on the GPS enabled laptop computer map. There was no scarcity of eagles, and almost every vista would have a white headed inhabitant perched regally up in a tree. What a rush, sitting in the car munching away on a take out salad, while we watched an eagle glide effortlessly across the sky. How could we have missed this for so long?

Our journey took us further north to Anderson Lake, where we saw three eagles soaring together across the lake. There was also a lone eagle watching the campground from high up in a nearby tree along the bank. I slowly got out of the car and edged closer to get a really good picture, but even this slight movement on my part, resulted in a hasty retreat by the winged warrior. It wasn’t long until we realized the car made the best blind for watching the raptors without frightening them into flight. Across the lake was a narrow strip of land before reaching the river. We found a causeway to take us across the lake and into this wilderness. As we slowly edged down the gravel road, we saw a pair of eagles in a nearby tree. This time they were in a tree less than 100 feet away, and the presence of our car didn’t seem to frighten them. I opened the sunroof and popped up like a little grey bearded prairie dog. OK, not so little, but you get the picture. Click, click, click, I snapped away. Three eagles were gracing us with their presence. Two were mature white headed birds, while the other was a bit scruffy looking and it didn’t have a white head nor white tail feathers. We later discovered that this was the normal coloring of an eagle younger than 4 years. We like to think it was a mother, father, and baby, but research tells us this is probably not the case. Still, when we tell the story, we will say that we think it was a family. After a few more stops along the river, we were “eagled” out! It was time to head for home, knowing this was only the beginning of a new winter pastime.



We pulled into the garage, but even before unloading the car, I had to slide the memory chip into the computer to see just what we had collected. I was like a gem collector with a bag of dirty stones, cleaning them off to see what I had. A bunch of tiny dirty rocks was what I had! Somehow the majesty was lost when the eagle was only  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch high, even when it was blown up on a 19-inch monitor. How disappointing. Cropping the picture down, only made the picture more grainy and blurred. This wasn't what I had in mind. I was definitely under gunned. I knew, that before I went out again, I needed more picture power. All the wives out there can certainly relate to this "men and their toys" syndrome. I like to think of them as tools, not toys, and I needed a better one.

After much searching on the internet, I decided a simple addition to my Minolta Dimage A-1 lens was not going to be the best solution. I had an older 35 mm film camera with lenses, and one of the lenses was a telephoto zoom. Obviously, this lens would do me no good on my current camera which didn't even have a removable lens, but, if I got a new Canon digital camera, I could use the old lenses. On a Canon digital camera, my old zoom lens would give me a magnification factor of 10, which in simple terms means, the eagle would look 10 times bigger. This was more comparable to medium quality binoculars. But added to this additional magnification, I would also have a picture with better resolution that could be blown up even larger. I was going from 6 to 8 mega pixels. Sensing my disappointment with the original pictures, my wife offered to get me the new camera as an early birthday present. I think, she too, was a bit disappointed with the pictures. Here is a note to fellow novice photographers looking to buy a new digital camera: Look at the optical zoom power only. The digital zoom is worthless. The added magnification results in reduced quality with the digital zoom. Also look at the picture pixel size for the camera. A 6 mega-pixel camera has twice the quality of a 3 mega-pixel camera. This is a very basic comparison, but it should help you make a more intelligent decision.

Several weeks had passed before the final decisions had been made and purchases completed. But now we were off again on another Sunday adventure. This time we were headed for Starved Rock State Park. The day started out cold and dreary. There was freezing frost predicted for our trip, but we packed up and headed north.

The drive north of Bloomington turned into a beautiful winter wonderland. The heavy fog was



freezing on the roadside plants. It was surreal looking out into the fog where everything was in shades of grey. It was like a living black and white picture world. I kept thinking that I should stop along



the road and capture some of these frozen beauties. While I did stop when we left the road for gas, I am still kicking myself for not taking the time to stop more and picture more. The overused phrase, "Never be too much in a hurry to stop and smell the roses." goes doubly for the photographer. 90% of a good picture is being in the right place at the right time and then realizing that fact and capturing the moment. Even a simple "point-and-shoot" camera



can take beautiful award winning pictures given the opportunity. If you read between the lines here, you can see that this quest for the perfect eagle picture is also a life lesson in photography, and if taken a bit deeper, it is a life lesson on the enjoyment of life. So, back on the road north, it wasn't long until we were following the signs to the park.



There were quite a few cars in the Visitor Center parking lot, and we pulled down close to the river. Several spectators were scanning the opposite shore with binoculars, and my wife grabbed ours and headed down the walk. I was already ahead of her, camera hanging around my neck. The adrenalin had kicked in. We were in eagle country again, and I had a new capture device. Like a hunter with a big gun, I held my head high as I started to scan the shore. There in the sky above the water was a soaring eagle. I had it in sight and pushed the shutter button half way down for focus. The miniature motors whirred and the lens moved out and back, and the eagle was clear in the viewfinder. I pressed the button down fully, as I followed the eagle swooping across the river surface looking for fish. Click, click, click, click

went the camera, as it took picture after picture, refocusing on the gliding rapture as it approached. Coming from the Bambi generation, I found early in life that hunting and killing was not in my nature, but with each “got-it” click of the shutter, I felt the same satisfaction as a big game hunter without the need to kill. This was one of the few times we saw eagles close up, soaring over the water. Most times, they were high overhead. I knew I loved photography but now I knew how much. Even reliving the experience, while writing or viewing the pictures, gives me a natural high. Experiencing nature in this pure form can certainly offset the winter blas.



We stood there for quite some time watching numerous eagles roosting in a tree across the river as they jockeyed for position. There were mature and young eagles sharing a single tree. The tree was full of nests, which we found out later were not eagle nests but remnants of another summer inhabitant. We counted about 8 eagles in the tree at one time. Now we had seen the eagles in flight over the river. We had seen numerous eagles roosting relatively close, and I had been able to picture them better with my new camera. Life was good.

We went inside the Visitor Center and my high was shattered by what I saw. There were pictures on sale, taken with obviously bigger lenses. 8 X 10's showed nothing but a head or a talon. What size lens must they have used? I learned another lesson that day. No matter what size gun you have, someone else will get a bigger one. While we can strive for perfection, the satisfaction has to come from the growth not from the attainment. To paraphrase Bach, questioning if you have reached perfection; the answer is, if you are here, you have not reached it. I noted my limitations, but still wanted to do better, to get

better pictures. (Bach's actual quote is "Here is a test to find whether your mission on earth is finished: If you're alive, it isn't" (Illusions 159). Perhaps I stretched that paraphrasing a bit, but I still wanted to give him credit.)



A trip across the bridge took us to more viewing opportunities. We saw an adult pair eager to be photographed, and then we went to the locks and had the opportunity to use a large telescope to view an immature eagle in a tree. Even it did not show the close-up pictured at the Visitor Center. I still wondered what equipment they had used. This was about the end of our viewing for that day. While we came back down along the river, we didn't see much to compare with the Starved Rock sightings. We arrived home tired, but somehow refreshed, too. And this time, the pictures were worth the trip.

No, I couldn't see how sharp the talons were, but I could see that there were talons and an orange hooked beak.

I had several weeks before our next scheduled eagle outing, so I looked into improving my pictures with an add-on lens to get me just a little closer. I found a lens that would attach to the end of my current telephoto lens and make the eagle 2.2 times bigger. For those familiar with camera lenses, the new lens combination would be comparable to a 1056mm lens on a 35 mm camera. This is a magnification of about 21 times. I ordered the new lens and had it shipped by 3-day air to arrive the day before we were to head to the Alton area near St. Louis. Reports indicated that this was another prime site for eagle watching.

It was cold and cloudy when my sister arrived to accompany us on our new itinerary. Her first words were, "Anybody who would go out eagle watching on a day like this is friggen crazy." We just smiled. She had never done this before and wasn't hooked yet. We drove directly to Alton, the point furthest south from home. From there, we would head west and north up along the river and see what was to be seen. The first stop was the Information Center. The lady there was more than helpful and told us where we could see an eagles nest just south along the river. This would be another first for us. She also told us about some white pelicans seen at one of the nearby harbors. These two points would prove to be invaluable. We would most certainly have missed both photo opportunities without these directions.



We headed south to the locks just south of town and stopped along the way to take some pictures of the eagle nest. The nest which can reach as much as 4,000 pounds is usually around 6 feet across. The sticks that make it up are about 5 feet long and might be as big around as a man's wrist. Most nests are about the size of a grand piano but have been known to reach 10 feet wide and 20 feet deep. The

biggest one found, came down during a storm and was placed on a truck and weighed in at 4,000 pounds. Now that is a lot of sticks. How would you like to be that eagle husband? “More sticks, more sticks, that’s all you think about. Do we have to add a new wing every year?” While this nest was far from the large potential, it was a nice starter nest for a growing family, and it had a view of the lock and damn on the river.

Our trip to the locks didn’t reward us with any good eagle pictures, but the museum was interesting. After a short visit there, we headed across the Mississippi by way of a beautiful bridge and turned into a wildlife area by the river. It was windy and cold. Even a pair of white pelicans sat motionless in the water with their heads snuggled down into their back feathers for warmth and protection from the wind. We could see



eagles circling overhead, and I was able to get a few pictures with my new lens. The long extension and magnification made holding it steady difficult. I either rested it on the car window, edge of the sunroof or steadied it with a single leg mono-pod. That is a tripod with only one leg. I got a picture of something resembling a grey and white pelican flying by, but a closer look at the picture later revealed the beak wasn’t that of a pelican. It looked like a Blue Heron.

We came back across the bridge and headed up to Piasa Harbor. We would have driven right past if it were not for the advice of the local volunteer at the Visitor Center. Note to self: When the opportunity is there to ask a resident about local sights, don’t hesitate. They are eager to share and they will have first-hand knowledge of the area and where to get the really good shots. We pulled into the parking lot and there in the water were two beautiful white pelicans. Their deep bills were not buried in feathers, and it was obvious that there were wild pelicans in Illinois. As I set up to take some pictures, nine or ten more came into view down the shore. I was always fascinated by the ugly pelicans in Florida, but these were beautiful pure white. I could have spent hours watching, however, we had more miles to travel before darkness fell.



The road along the river from Alton to Pere Marquette State Park is as beautiful as any in the state. High bluffs rise on one side of the road while the “Mighty Mississippi” flanks you on the other. In the summer, the sandy-colored bluffs are accented with green vegetation. With a little imagination, you can be in Big Sur, California. OK, make that with a lot of imagination.



No trip to this part of the state is complete without a free ferry ride across the Illinois. Once reaching the other side, we turned around and got back on the ferry before it headed back. We hoped for some diving eagles searching for the dazed fish in the ferry's wake, unfortunately, this was not to be. We just had to enjoy the ride.

Before reaching the park, a small quaint little town exits off to the east. Elsay, home to Principia College is like a storybook village. The houses are small and ornate. You might expect to see storybook dolls coming and going. And the pie at the diner; well, let's just say, I shot my diet that day. Principia College up the hill has a Christian Scientist affiliation and was very impressive to drive through. There is a beautiful overlook near the chapel.



Pere Marquette State Park offers camping, hiking and another opportunity to watch for eagles. From the riverfront parking lot, several roosting eagles were visible across the river. By this time, we had seen enough birds, and these far off specks didn't have the appeal they did before. It was time to head home.



A picture review at home that night revealed the best shots were the white pelicans. We would go out the next day over to Hannibal MO on the Mississippi. That trip, while providing clear skies, did not offer many eagles to view. We did get pictures of some wild turkeys running along the fence row and several good shots of red-tailed hawks. I had to wonder if the mild winter temperatures were tempting the eagles to return to their native northern climes. Even if I don't make any more quests for the mighty eagle this year, I am already planning itineraries for next year. I have learned a great deal about picturing these majestic creatures and photography in general. Also hidden in these experiences were more of life's lessons.

I don't know if enjoying nature and the outdoors has made me a better photographer, or if growing as a photographer, has made me appreciate nature and the beauty around me more. In either case, I am a better person because of it.



Eagle viewing/photographing hints

- 1) Don't go out without some type of magnifying viewer. You can use a pair of binoculars with at least a power of 10 or a telescope. Even with good eyes, the eagles will be far enough away to limit your enjoyment without the magnification.
- 2) If you are planning on taking any pictures, you are wasting your time without at least a 7 power telephoto lens on a digital camera or camcorder or a 300mm lens for a 35 mm camera.
- 3) It is very difficult to spot the eagles while you drive. Take someone along to look while you watch the road. Stopped cars are a good indication that someone saw something. Take the hint and pull off the road and look.
- 4) If you are very close to the perching birds, stay in the car and be quiet. Even if you have to strain to see through the windows, it will be better than scaring the eagles away.
- 5) Take lots of pictures (digital); you can always delete the ones you don't need, but, you can't go back and get a shot you didn't shoot after the eagle flies away. There is nothing worse than holding the camera waiting for that perfect shot as you approach the subject, only to have it fly away before you even get off one shot.
- 6) Eagles often stay still on their roost. From a distance with a good telephoto lens, use a tripod to get pictures that are not blurred. If you don't have something to steady the camera, stabilize it on a branch or fence.
- 7) Use the internet to search for reports on good viewing spots and when in town, ask at their Visitor Center for directions to good viewing.
- 8) Above all else, enjoy your time out. Learn to appreciate all of nature around you. Even if the prime objective isn't there, go to plan "B". Picture an old barn or an unfamiliar bird.