

Spanning the Gap

Wintering Eagles at the Gap



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Spanning the Gap
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Wintering eagles arrive at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area in early December and leave during the last two weeks of March.

Eagles seek open water to catch fish, and the Delaware, which remains at least partly ice-free even in the coldest winters, is excellent wintering habitat for them.

The park typically hosts between 10 and 20 wintering bald eagles, as it provides 3 critical elements for the winter habitat of bald eagles:

- **open water for fishing**
- **large stands of trees for perches and roosts**
- **protection from human disturbance**

Open Water

The primary food of wintering eagles is fish. Eagles typically perch on a branch extending over a body of water, and the branch is usually halfway between the surface of the water and the top of the tree. From these perches eagles swoop down toward their prey.

Eagles have also been observed fishing on the wing



Looking for Eagles

The easiest places to look for eagles in the park are at the public access areas:

In Pennsylvania: Smithfield Beach on River Road, Bushkill Access, and Milford Beach on Route 209

In New Jersey: Kittatinny Point Visitor Center just off Interstate 80 at the Water Gap

If you go looking for eagles:

Do not approach eagles, particularly on foot.

Use binoculars to watch eagles from a distance.

Don't brake suddenly if you see an eagle.

If you pull your car onto a

and wading for fish. Favorite feeding areas include both shallow, fast rapids, and calm, shallow waters along river islands and sandbars.

Trees for Perches and Roosts

Eagles may spend up to 90% of their time in *hunting perches* and *loafing perches*. Typical perch trees are sycamore, white pine, and oak. *Night roosts* are sheltered areas where eagles gather to perch overnight.

Bald eagles enter their breeding cycle while still in wintering grounds. Courtship and nest-building can begin at the end of February.

Protection From Human Disturbance

Eagles do not tolerate the presence of people well. Eagles will "flush" if approached within 1600 feet (1/3 mile.) If human activity continually flushes an eagle from its hunting and loafing perches, the eagle wastes energy on flight that is needed to maintain good physical condition, to survive the winter, and to successfully reproduce.

road shoulder to watch eagles, be careful of road conditions.



This article is condensed from a report written by the Division of Research and Resource Management at Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area.

(NPS sketches by Donna Sonnenberg)