

The Bald Eagle

Near Alton, Illinois, the train enters bald eagle territory. Each winter thousands of bald eagles migrate to the St. Louis-Alton area, making it the second-largest population of bald eagles in the country after Alaska. From December to March you can spot eagles hunting for fish in the cold waters of the Illinois and Mississippi Rivers. Watch for these majestic birds of prey flying over the water or perched in high branches along the river. If you have a chance to spend time in Alton, you can see eagles from the Alton Visitors Center and nearby wildlife refuges.

It's easy to identify the adult eagles by the gleaming white feathers on their heads and tails, contrasting with a black body and yellow feet. Young bald eagles have a blend of brown and white feathers, and take about five years for their heads and tails to become completely white. This makes juvenile bald eagles a bit harder to identify, except that even the young birds are bigger than almost every other bird in the sky. Their outstretched wings measure six to eight feet across! The Golden Eagle is the only bird that can match this size, but they sport a brown body and golden head, and are more likely to be seen in open terrain of deserts and mountains than in wooded areas along the river.

After decades of perilously low populations due to pollution and hunting, bald eagles received federal protection and numbers are steadily growing all across North America. They range from places such as Quebec through British Columbia, down to Florida and Southern California, including mountain, desert and river regions.

A Bald Eagle can fly at an altitude of over 10,000 feet, reach speeds of over 30 miles per hour in flight, and dive at double that velocity. Visualize yourself soaring two miles high, diving straight down at 75 miles per hour, then in one motion grabbing a fish with your feet and launching straight back up. Bald eagles can spot prey from two miles away, but more commonly perch or soar at lower altitudes. A bald eagle's eyesight is five times as keen as that of a person with 20/20 vision.

The bald eagle was viewed as a symbol of power, strength, and courage, and that is why it was chosen as our national bird. Dr. Benjamin Barton, a strong political figure in the late 1700's, is given credit for comparing the eagle's traits to our nation's growing political power. Today the easiest place to see a bald eagle is on the quarter and the United States National Seal, but if you keep a sharp eye out, you may be able to spot one outside your train window as well.

Source(s):

Bald Eagle Info.com. (2010). Retrieved January 7, 2011 from <http://www.baldeagleinfo.com/eagle/eagle8.html> .

O'Brien, D. (2011). See the Bald Eagles Around Alton, Illinois. Retrieved January 7, 2011 from http://stlouis.about.com/od/topattractions/tp/Alton_Eagles.htm.

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