

Eagle Watching Adventures Await in Southwest Illinois

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ALTON - All eyes are on the sky as the Great Rivers & Routes region prepares for the annual winter migration of the American Bald Eagle. Every January, experts anticipate

as many as 1,000 bald eagles will migrate to the area reclaiming their winter roosts along the Meeting of the Great Rivers National Scenic Byway just outside St. Louis in Illinois.

To celebrate the return of this majestic bird, the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau along with the Audubon Center at Riverlands, National Great Rivers Museum and Pere Marquette State Park will host a virtual Eagle Festival Saturday, Jan. 2 from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. Due to ongoing COVID pandemic issues, the annual in-person Eagle Fest was transformed into a virtual experience. The event will be broadcast live on the Audubon Center at Riverland's Facebook page as well as the Great Rivers & Routes Facebook page.

Meet an American Bald Eagle up close and virtually; watch ice carvers create an eagle out of a block of ice; learn eagle watching tips; enjoy a Do It Yourself Eagle Craft and more during this year's Virtual Eagle Fest. A variety of panels and information sessions will be held throughout the four-hour event.

"The annual Eagle Festival is a great way to celebrate our winter tourism season," Cory Jobe, President & CEO of the Great Rivers & Routes Tourism Bureau noted. "This year due to the pandemic, we wanted to encourage people to take an eagle watching road trip to visit the region, but do it in a safe way. Hosting a Virtual Eagle Festival is a great way to ring in Eagle Season."

Virtual sessions include:

Eagle Meet & Greets with Liberty, the American Bald Eagle from World Bird Sanctuary, and her handler Jen Johnson (at the top of each hour);

Basics to Eagle Watching session focused on where to go for eagle watching, where to look and how to identify an eagle;

Do It Yourself Eagle Craft sponsored by the Audubon Center;

Eagle Watching Discussion Panel featuring representatives from the Audubon Center, National Great Rivers Museum, Two Rivers National Wildlife Center and Pere Marquette State Park

Eagle Conservation Story

Habitat Management for Eagles discussion led by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

Specific times of the sessions will be announced on both the Audubon Center and Great Rivers & Routes Facebook pages.

The Tourism Bureau will unveil a new eagle watching mobile passport during the Virtual Eagle Fest. The Eagle Watching Passport, which is free to download to mobile phones, encourages self-guided eagle watching tours and provides users with an

opportunity to win a free Eagle Watching T-Shirt after checking in to five different locations.

The passport is available to download at

<https://www.riversandroutes.com/>

A video accompanies each passport stop on the passport to provide more information about the locations. The videos were created by Pere Marquette State Park Site Interpreter Kayla Alexander.

The passport program is open to eagle watchers of all ages. The mobile platform replaces the traditional paper card passport that had been used in the past. The T Shirt giveaway encourages visitors to stop by the various Eagle Watching Destinations across the region. Visitors who go to five of the specified destinations (Pere Marquette State Park, Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge, Alton Visitor Center, Audubon Center at Riverlands, National Great Rivers Museum, TreeHouse Wildlife Center, Lewis & Clark State Historic Site, Elsay General Store, Willoughby Heritage Farm, or the Grafton Visitor Center) and log the PIN available at each site will receive a free eagle t-shirt. An automatic registration form will appear on the mobile passport once the five destinations have been logged. Users will be able to request a T-Shirt by size and provide a mailing address for delivery. The T-Shirt giveaway is sponsored in part by Alton Memorial Hospital and Phillips 66.

Every day visitors can travel along the Meeting of the Great Rivers National Scenic Byway to visit the “Eagle Watching Destinations” featured in the 2020 Fall/Winter Travel Guide.

Annually, the opportunities for eagle watching continue to grow in throughout the region. Eagles have been spotted at Lake Lou Yaeger in Litchfield and visitors can hike around the lake on an eagle watching adventures.

While the pandemic has meant some eagle events have moved from in-person activities to virtual experiences, the migrating eagles don't know that. Make plans now to enjoy some eagle-eyed fun this winter in the Great Rivers & Routes region.

For visitors who would like to make eagle watching a winter getaway, there are numerous eagle packages and specials available at hotels and bed & breakfast inns in Alton, Grafton and Elsay. For the latest eagle watching updates or to receive your free Eagle Watcher's Guide, call 1-800-248-6645 or go to RiversandRoutes.com.