

# Pere Marquette to Offer Free Eagle-Watching Tours This Winter

by Sydney Sinks, News Reporter  
December 28 2023 10:09 AM



**GRAFTON** - It's eagle season once again, and you can increase your chances of seeing an eagle by stopping by Pere Marquette State Park's eagle-watching program this winter.

The all-day program is completely free. Now in its 30th year, the tours will take people through a hands-on presentation at the Pere Marquette Visitor Center and then a drive to

different locations around the park where eagles can be spotted. Lev Smolianski, the park's natural resource coordinator, explained that while they can't guarantee you will see an eagle, the chances are high.

"It depends on the weather and a whole bunch of other factors. But — knock on wood — in the 30 years this program has been done here, there hasn't been a single time that we've gone out and haven't seen an eagle," he said.

Smolianski and Scott Isringhausen, the park's eagle expert, will lead the tours. They explained that you're more likely to see eagles in this area when temperatures are colder up north in Minnesota and the Prairie Pothole Region. These colder temperatures freeze the rivers and force the eagles farther south into the Riverbend region.

There have been more eagle sightings in recent years. Smolianski said that eagles were nearing extinction a few decades ago because manmade chemicals had made their eggs brittle, so less eaglets were hatching. Now, however, eagles are much more common in this part of the U.S.

"The cool thing is, about 35 years ago there was one eagle's nest in the entire state of Illinois. And through conservation efforts and rehabilitation, there are now several hundred eagle nests, and there are a few we actually drive by and see when we do our tours," Smolianski added. "I think the eagle is a symbol of triumph, how it was almost extirpated or close to extinction 30, 40 years ago...to now when they are abundant and everywhere. I think they're also just a really cool animal and they're very charismatic. People like to see those large, charismatic animals, and they're also quite regal. They're America's bird. We love America's bird."

Smolianski is looking forward to seeing more eagles this year and sharing the experience with visitors. He noted that people are always ecstatic when they see eagles, and he loves helping to facilitate that moment.

"It's really exciting to see people's faces when they get to see a bald eagle. They're like, whoa," he laughed. "I really enjoy people connecting with nature, and eagles are just such a cool bird. It's really rewarding when someone sees an eagle for the first time or even the 400th time. It's just as exciting."

The eagle-watching program is an all-day program that starts at 8 a.m. on Jan. 9, Feb. 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 15, 21, 22, 23 and 26 and March 8, 2023. Reservations are required. You can call the Pere Marquette Visitor Center at (618) 786-3323 for additional information or to reserve your spot.