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Life/Styles

Bald eagles perch right in our back yard

By Jim Shelton, Register Staff
01/25/2006

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This is the season Connecticut eagle freaks live for.

The trees are bare, winter has set in and reports of bald eagles fill the air. This means local bird-watchers have a choice. They can sign up for a private eagle-watching tour, reserve a spot at a state Department of Environmental Protection eagle event — or go freelance.



Peter Vitali of Hamden spotted this bald eagle at the edge of the marsh across the street from Target in North Haven. He used a Swarovski HD 65-mm angled spotting scope with the 30X eyepiece and a Nikon CP4300 Coolpic to get this photo.

Peter Vitali of Hamden chooses the latter. He's one of many local birders who keeps an eye in the skies for eagles.

"It's a beautiful bird to see," notes Vitali, a serious bird-watcher for the past 10 years. "That white head sticks out like a sore thumb."

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According to the state DEP, about 100 bald eagles have spent the winter in Connecticut in recent years, with a much smaller number nesting here in the summer months. They're drawn to Connecticut's major rivers and reservoirs, including Southbury's Shepaug Dam.

This year's numbers may be down, DEP biologists say, because of milder temperatures. Bald eagles fly south from Canada in winter to feed in unfrozen waters.

The species is classified as endangered in Connecticut and threatened at the federal level.

But that doesn't keep local birders from trying to locate the majestic critters with their binoculars. For that matter, it doesn't mean local birders have to travel deep into the woods or onto mountaintops.

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Vitali, for example, has seen bald eagles while driving along State Street in Hamden, near the Quinnipiac River. He's also seen one near a department store in North Haven.

"Last year, someone mentioned seeing them in here, so I started looking," Vitali says, standing beside his truck in a parking lot on State Street. His eyes dart into the nearby marsh. "What have we got over there? Oh, another hawk."

Elsewhere, eagle-eyed residents have spotted bald eagles over Lighthouse Point Park in New Haven, Lake Quonnapaug in Guilford, Milford Point and the lower Housatonic River, the Connecticut River from Old Saybrook to Haddam and other areas.

You develop a knack for identifying them, Vitali says.

"They're three times the size of that hawk," he explains, motioning across the street. Then he chuckles. "My game plan is to go out two or three times a week, looking for big objects in trees, where there aren't supposed to be big objects."

The state DEP says adult bald eagles have a wingspan of up to seven feet. They can fly 36 to 44 mph. Young eagles and females are brown and don't have the distinct white head of the adult males.

Earlier this month, a national count of eagles elicited only one sighting in Greater New Haven, near the Housatonic River.

Still, Vitali and other eagle devotees remain vigilant.

"You can be looking for them anywhere there's open water during the winter," he says. "They're here and then they're gone. I'm hooked on them."

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