

NORTHWEST ARKANSAS WINTER BALD EAGLE AUTO TOUR



Described below is a 23-mile long route through Benton County during December-January, peak period for seeing wintering Bald Eagles. Expect sightings of as many as 10-20 Bald Eagles, including adults and subadults, without special effort. You can see eagles without binoculars, but you can see them better with binoculars.

No walking is required along the 23 miles. You can stop anywhere along the route, pull safely off the road and scan fields, sky, and tree line for eagles. The stop at Eagle Watch Nature Trail (EWNT; see a separate birding guide for additional information) can include a ¼ mile walk to an observation platform overlooking a cove of SWEPCO Lake where Bald Eagles often perch in trees. They also soar with other large birds in the vicinity.

The tour includes both paved highway and graded county roads. With the exception noted above for EWNT, the tour is all driving and can be easily completed in a couple of hours. There is no public land along the route, so scanning for eagles, other birds and wildlife should be restricted to highway rights-of-way.

Paved roads are busy with traffic, including trucks. If you stop be sure and pull completely off the road. Local residents are familiar with wintering eagles and most are friendly with visitors.

The tour begins in Gentry and ends at Maysville. Snacks, gas, and bathrooms are available at both ends, but not along the 23 miles in the middle.

The best results for seeing Bald Eagles and other birds involve (1) careful scanning of the sky for soaring birds; (2) checking open fields and pond edges, because eagles often perch on the ground; (3) looking over treelines, because eagles also perch in trees alongside open fields.

Eagle math is pretty basic: more scanning equals more eagles

This tour starts at the intersection of Highways 12 and 59 in Gentry. It ends, at mile 23.1, at the Maysville Handistop, intersection of Highways 43 and 72.

START: Set your odometer at 0.0 at the intersection of Highways 12 and 59 in Gentry. If you are on 59, turn WEST onto 12 and travel for 0.2 miles to Collins Street. Turn RIGHT (north) onto Collins. Collins will eventually become Browning.

At 1.9 miles notice big farm ponds, often with several species of geese. Eagles are often in the area.

At mile 2.45, turn LEFT onto Safari Road and travel WEST. The entrance to Wild Wilderness Drive Through Safari is at mile 3.2. Continue to mile 3.3 and notice large ponds. Many birds are attracted to

wheat fields, plus Savannah Sparrows, flocks of White-crowned and Harris's Sparrows, where there is brush or fence rows. This is ALL private land, so observe from the roadway.

Now, Floyd Moore Road makes a bit of a dogleg: at mile 10.3 there is an intersection with Ruby Hall Road. Turn LEFT (south) onto Ruby Hall, continue to mile 10.55, then turn RIGHT (west) back onto Floyd Moore.

The intersection with Highway 43 is at mile 11.8. Turn RIGHT (north) onto 43. **PRECAUTIONARY NOTE:** There is an amazing amount of traffic on 43, much of it large trucks, and sometimes drivers exceed 55 MPH. Please keep this in mind.

There are many eagles along here. The safe way to handle 43 is to keep up your safety guard. When you stop for scanning and admiring eagles, make sure you get all the way off the highway with a good line-of-sight so that you can see vehicles and they can see you. These busy drivers are not going to stop for eagles and they don't like to slow down for you.

Note Dickson Cemetery at mile 13.9. This is a safe place to stop for scanning. There are often eagles, especially to the west and southwest.

At mile 16.4 you are in the Spavinaw valley. Just ahead, to the north, is a bluffline that marks the edge of the former Beatie Prairie. Eagles and other large birds often soar in the updrafts associated with this valley and bluffline topography. Traffic is moving fast here; find a safe place to pull over for some scanning.

The intersection of Loux Road and 43 is at mile 17.7. Turn LEFT (west) onto Loux. The Loux family home is at mile 18.2. Maurice and Theda Mae Loux welcomed birders with an interest in seeing eagles. Their daughter Carole lives on the place now, and is also welcoming.

At mile 18.7, Loux Road intersects State Line Road, separating Arkansas and Oklahoma. Turn RIGHT (north) onto State Line. Travel to mile 18.9, the intersection of State Line and E450. Turn LEFT (west) into Oklahoma on E450.

At mile 19.8 E450 intersects S710. Turn RIGHT (north) onto S710. Scan sky, fields, and treelines along the road, especially those to the west and south. Eagles often perch on the ground. Don't be fooled by the distance. Remember you are looking for a huge bird that at distance makes an American Crow look the size of a Brown-headed Cowbird. We sometimes see Red-shafted Flickers in trees along the road. There are also a few records for Prairie Falcons.

At mile 21.8, S710 intersects with E430. Turn RIGHT (east) back toward Arkansas.

At mile 22.4, E430 intersects with Highway 43 (same as OK county road 716). Turn LEFT (north).

END of the tour at mile 23.1, the Maysville HandiStop.

--Joseph C. Neal, December 2012