



# Eagle-Watching in Pennsylvania

*Raystown Lake, Huntingdon County*



## **A Raystown Lake Snapshot**

**Facilities:** U. S. Army Corps of Engineers

**Driving Directions:** From the Pennsylvania Turnpike at Breezewood (Exit 12), take Route 30 west to Route 26 north. Follow Rt. 26 to Raystown Lake. From Huntingdon, take Route 26 South. Follow Rt. 26 to Raystown Lake.

**Viewing Directions:** Begin at the Seven Points Visitor Center

**Property Hours:** Day use and over-night accommodations

**Best Eagle Viewing Season:** Year-round

**Activities at the site:** Hunting, fishing, boating, birding, hiking, camping

**Other Wildlife:** Osprey, waterfowl, songbirds, aquatic and semi-aquatic mammals

## **Where to go, what to look for**

Raystown Lake is a good place to observe eagles in all seasons, but the best times to enjoy bird-watching and eagle-watching are spring and winter months. There is a nesting population and a good wintering population of bald eagles. The lake is extensive, so it offers many miles of shoreline for eagles to perch and forage for fish. There are four pairs of bald eagles nesting on the wooded hillsides surrounding Raystown Lake, but nests are fairly obscured by foliage and not easily observed. They also are easily disturbed so their locations are not disclosed to the public. Consequently, the best eagle-watching opportunities are for viewing foraging and resting eagles along the lake edge and at the dam. Not only is this a popular stopover for birds, but it also gets a lot of human visitors when the weather warms up.



Hal Korber/PGC Photo

A flood control dam along the Raystown Branch of the Juniata River formed this 28-mile-long lake. Its shoreline snakes and bends 118 miles around the lake's perimeter creating jutting points, v-shaped inlets and deep coves. Several coves branch back into a series of inlets and conceal small marshy wetlands. This 8,300-acre impoundment offers a lot of open-water habitat for eagles, waterfowl, and other water birds. It is the largest body of water that is wholly within Pennsylvania's borders. The lake's deep waters allow ice-free conditions to exist in winters when other bodies of water are locked in ice. The lake has a healthy fish population, including striped bass and gizzard shad.

In spite of heavy recreational use during summer, bald eagles thrive here because there are so many miles of shoreline and so many places for them to perch in trees.



Bald Eagle

USFWS Photo

Mature and immature eagles are seen year-round, as long as open water remains through winter. In fact, this lake may offer a refuge for eagles that primarily use streams during periods of high water or icing along those streams. By mid-winter, eagle pairs are renewing their pair bonds with courtship rituals such as rearranging the grass-lined center of the nest and adding new twigs and branches to the mass of interwoven sticks. During this courtship period, the pair is frequently seen together. They often soar together, sometimes performing impressive aerial displays, whirling, plummeting and chasing one another.

A great variety of waterfowl stops at Raystown Lake during spring and fall migration. The Pennsylvania Game Commission manages a large tract along the lake's west shore. This waterfowl management area includes a restricted propagation area, but most of the mitigation area is open to the public from September through February and accessible from the Aitch Recreation Area.

Ring-necked Ducks



Joe Kosack/PGC Photo

There also are several no wake coves throughout the lake. Migrating ducks may rest and feed in any of the quiet coves or out on the open water as recreation slows. It is possible to find floating clusters of ring-necked ducks, red-breasted mergansers, common mergansers, hooded mergansers, ruddy ducks, buffleheads and northern pintails. Horned grebes, pied-billed grebes and the occasional red-necked grebe may be seen as well. During early spring, small numbers of blue-winged teal, common loons and American scoters may show up on the lake as well. Gulls are a familiar site in the early morning at the Aitch Access boat launch. Ring-billed gulls and herring gulls are frequently seen and sometimes Bonaparte's gulls. The latter species is most often observed in the deepest waters of the lake.

Green Heron



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

The winding shoreline provides opportunity to see river otters and mink slipping in and out of the water while hunting. River otters frequent large, lakeside rocks on which they repeatedly leave scat. The droppings, an obvious sign of their presence, usually contain indigestible parts of prey, like fish fins and crayfish shells. Mink, another member of the weasel family, also forage along the shore for prey. This sleek, proficient hunter methodically scours every log and rock pile along the shoreline. Solitary sandpipers, spotted sandpipers and killdeer comb the muddy shoreline as well. It also is common to see green herons and great blue herons stalking the lake's edge.

Some of the marshy wetlands around the lake provide habitat for some of the rarer birds of the state. The Old Crow Wetland is along Route 22, south of the road about a quarter-mile east of the intersection of Routes 22 and 26. It is less than 10 acres, but gives some access to the emergent vegetation where many birds can be found.

Osprey



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

This is where you can find green herons, willow flycatchers, and red-winged blackbirds, as well as many waterfowl species in migration. It seems to be a rarity hotspot, because it is a wetland in an otherwise forested and agricultural landscape — a little cat-tail oasis. Various backwater areas with small wetlands have been places to find bitterns and marsh wrens.

River Road along the Raystown Branch of the Juniata River has a diversity of bird habitats. The Point Access is a Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission boat launch where the Raystown Branch joins the main stem of the Juniata River. River Road parallels the Raystown Branch and ends at the dam breast. There are places to see turkeys, hawks, and many other birds species. This sheltered area often hosts many of those “semi-hardy” wintering songbirds often sought by birders. The loquacious Carolina wren is a common resident.

Five trails, providing 70 miles of hiking, wind through a variety of habitats at Raystown Lake. Hillside Nature Trail is a half-mile trail accessible at the Seven Points Visitor Center. This short trail traverses shrubby field and forestland with hemlock, dogwood, beech, maple, viburnum, and tangles of grapevine. This area also has a man-made pond and a great view of Seven Points Bay. Many common birds inhabit the field and woodland along the trail, including hairy and downy woodpeckers, song sparrows, yellow-billed cuckoos, northern cardinals, mourning doves, Baltimore orioles and eastern bluebirds. Pileated woodpeckers are found throughout the woods around the lake in all seasons. In the evenings, barred owls and eastern screech-owls can be heard in the woods around the lake.

Red-tailed Hawk



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo



The Riverside trail is another short trail that covers multiple habitats. The trail begins downstream of the dam at the Old Schoolhouse area. The trail parallels the Raystown Branch of the Juniata River at its beginning. Belted kingfisher, chimney swifts, tree swallows, yellow-throated vireos, warbling vireos and wood ducks are common in this section. This is a good place for a variety of woodpeckers. Soon the trail passes through wetland habitat. An arch span bridge crosses the lower end of the wetland. At the far end of the bridge, an observation platform provides a view of the wetland where many waterfowl and marsh birds can be found. Muskrats and beavers are common here. The trail then passes through successional forest and open fields with crop plantings. American woodcock, ruffed grouse and wild turkeys may be seen at this end of the trail.

Other good places for convenient birding include the Ridenour Lookout, the Seven Points Recreational Area, the Hilltop Picnic area, the Brumbaugh homestead, and the Aitch Pennsylvania Fish and Boat Commission boat access near Marklesburg, the En-triken Overlook near the south end of the lake, and the Trough Creek State Park. Near Markesburg, the Aitch Propagation Area provides nesting waterfowl habitat. It is restricted access area, so the interior ponds are off limits to the public during nesting season to protect the nesting ducks and geese.

Trough Creek State Park includes 554 acres around Trough Creek on the east side of the lake. There are many forest and edge species here, including some that live in the conifers — red-breasted nuthatches, blue-headed vireos, pine warblers, and Blackburnian warblers. This park is known as a migrant trap in spring migration.

The mid-winter bald eagle survey is very successful each year, demonstrating that this lake is an excellent place to see eagles during the cold and snowy months. As many as 19 bald eagles have been recorded during an annual, mid-winter survey conducted at the lake. A great place to find eagles in winter is at the lake's northern end, below the dam and spillway. Eagles may be perched on trees in this area and downstream along the river. Also, the Aitch Recreational Area on the west side and the Tatman Run Access Area on the east side both can have high numbers of wintering eagles. Reports of 15–20 eagles are not unusual near Tatman Run. Some of the wintering eagles are residents; others have migrated from northern breeding territories. When streams in the region are high from snowmelt or recent rains, eagles often seek still water where foraging for fish is easier. Then, Raystown Lake can be a real eagle hotspot.

Red-breasted Merganser



Jake Dingel/PGC Photo

In winter, there are many birding highlights at Lake Raystown besides eagles. There has been a Christmas Bird Count conducted here since 1993, centered at the Seven Points Marina. Many waterfowl, especially the three mergansers, are counted each winter because much of the lake remains open. Also, some semi-hardy birds, like eastern phoebes, winter wrens, hermit thrush, and yellow-rumped warblers, are found near the lake in the count regularly.

The forests along the Juniata River and the Lower Branch of the Juniata are among the best places in the state for the cerulean warbler, which is on the [U.S. WatchList for Birds of Conservation Concern](#).

This beautiful blue warbler inhabits tall trees along streams or on ridgetops. The northern parula, yellow-throated warbler and other canopy dwellers also are found in these forests.

Raystown Lake is nestled in a valley surrounded by ridges. Tussey Mountain to the west is an important migration corridor for golden and bald eagles, especially in spring. The Allegheny Front and other ridges in the southcentral region are very important for the migration of the Eastern United States' golden eagle population.

More explicit recommendations for bird-watching locations at Raystown Lake are offered by David and Trudy Kyler in Chapter 17 of the **Birds of Central Pennsylvania**, edited by Nick Bolgiano and Greg Grove (Stone Mountain Publishing, State College).

#### **For additional information, contact:**

Pennsylvania Game Commission, Southcentral Region, 8627 William Penn Highway, Huntingdon, PA 16652. Telephone: 814-643-1831.

U. S. Army Corps of Engineers, 6145 Seven Points Rd., Hesston, PA 16652. Telephone: 814-658-3405.

Trough Creek State Park, 16362 Little Valley Road, James Creek, PA 16657-9302. Telephone: 814-658-3847.

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