

**St. Charles Park District
Nature News – January 27**

During a winter like the one we've had, it's easy for people to put nature on hold. In fact I've heard, "It's too _____ (cold, cloudy, snowy, windy, downright nasty) to go outside," more times over the last several weeks than I care to count. But you know what? Despite the cold, clouds, snow and wind, and even the downright nastiness, it's still possible—even enjoyable—to explore the outdoors in winter.

Last week provided just such an occasion. The weather wasn't warm by any means—I think the high that day crept up to the low 30s before plummeting to 15F around lunch time. But that didn't stop an intrepid group of folks from layering up and heading out to see just what nature had to offer.

The group—a fine collection of naturalists who help teach our St. Charles Park District school programs—gathers monthly for what we call "meanders," leisurely strolls that mimic the path of a meandering stream. Each outing has a loosely based theme, which we may or may not stick to, depending on what we find as we amble along.

Last week's "aim," if you want to call it that, was to try and spot a bald eagle along the Fox River. Eagle numbers being what they are these days, it's certainly a possibility, though not always a given.

We first scanned the river adjacent to Pottawatomie Park, where park employees average about one eagle sighting a week. With the wind blowing steadily from the north and the temperature falling, we scanned the skies just long enough to be certain no eagles were out and about, then plotted our next destination.

We decided to head to Batavia, to the area where the south Batavia dam once stood. Two adult eagles are known to frequent the cottonwoods there. Binoculars glued to our eyes, we scanned the trees up and down the river but, alas, we again came up empty-handed. Or did we?

Temporarily setting our eagle goal aside, we began to pay closer attention to just exactly what was going on around us. First, we noticed that the cold front hadn't yet made its way to Batavia. Second, we saw that there were birds *everywhere*.

Out on the river, mallard ducks, black ducks, goldeneyes, common mergansers and of course some Canada geese were feeding and frolicking. The mallards and black ducks dabbled for their food while the goldeneyes and mergansers dove for theirs; the geese, meanwhile, paddled along and generally stayed to themselves. All the waterfowl, whether dabblers or divers or paddlers, spent considerable time bathing and preening, all the better to keep their winter plumage in tip-top weather-protecting condition.

Then we looked up. In the trees above our heads, cedar waxwings and wintering American robins were gorging themselves on berries (buckthorn, unfortunately); while

juncos and chickadees flitted about in search of seeds. Downy, hairy and red-bellied woodpeckers plied branches and trunks in search of tucked-away morsels.

Even as the breeze picked up and the weather started to turn, we heard two unmistakable sounds of spring—the “birdy-birdy-birdy” territory call of the northern cardinal, and the staccato drumming of a male downy woodpecker proclaiming his turf.

Before I forget, let me mention that we did see eagles, too—three, to be exact. An immature sporting mottled brown and white plumage soared past, heading north, while two mature adults—the south dam pair, no doubt—flushed from the trees a bit further down the path in Les Arends Forest Preserve.

If you’re one of the many folks who’ve holed up for the winter, consider changing your ways this weekend. Be bold! Bundle up, head outside and take a look around. Before long, I’m sure you’ll find there’s plenty to behold.

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