

The Dalles Lock and Dam welcomes raptor (and human) visitors during Eagle Watch 2013

By Amber Tilton, The Dalles Lock and Dam park ranger

Nestled between Oregon and Washington is the Columbia River Gorge National Scenic Area, home to year-round resident bald eagles and temporary host to hundreds more eagles that winter there. As northern rivers and lakes freeze over and animals go into hibernation, food sources become scarce and the eagles migrate to the Gorge.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Portland District operates three dams on the Columbia River where visitors and employees alike often spot America's national symbol. "The mighty Columbia River is the second largest river in North America and provides an excellent food source for our winter guests," said Amber Tilton, park ranger at The Dalles Lock and Dam in the Portland District. "Each winter we see an influx of these raptors taking advantage of the open water to hunt for fish and waterfowl."

Westrick Park at The Dalles Dam has become a prime roosting habitat for bald eagles in recent years. The park was closed to the public several years ago due to increased security restrictions and declining budgets and staff levels. Since then it has become a secluded, quiet location whose proximity to the river makes it a perfect wintering site for bald eagles and other migratory birds. As more raptors arrived, the natural resources staff at the dam noticed an increase in visitors, which led to development of the annual Eagle Watch three years ago.

The Eagle Watch is held in the parking lot at The Dalles Dam Visitor Center, across from Westrick Park where the eagles roost. "This location allows everyone to enjoy watching these amazing birds while still keeping a respectful distance so as not to disturb them," Tilton said.

During this year's Eagle Watch, held Jan. 19 and 20, more than 400 visitors enjoyed seeing 30 eagles through powerful spotting scopes and binoculars while keeping warm with a blazing bonfire and hot cocoa.

In addition to eagle watching, volunteers taught children about bald eagle anatomy by dressing them up in an eagle costumes. "Thanks to the great partnership we have with the U.S. Forest Service, Rowena Wildlife Clinic, and The Dalles Discovery Center, we can provide outdoor wildlife viewing and live raptor education during the event," Tilton said. "They were able to arrange for special guest appearances by an American kestrel and a great horned owl. What better way to learn about nature – our visitors loved seeing these living birds up close."