

EAGLE WATCH NATURE TRAIL



Bald Eagles at EWNT 4 January 2011

Photo by Terry Stanfill

Location: Eagle Watch Nature trail is in Benton County, just west of Gentry.

How to get there: Notice Highway 59 on your Arkansas highway map. Gentry is at the intersection of 59 and Highway 12. From this intersection, travel W on 12 for approx. two miles. The Eagle Watch Nature Trail is approx. 1 mile W of the city limits on the S side of the highway. Look for the parking lot on the highway's S side, immediately E of the highway bridge spanning Little Flint Creek. There is a map and information sign in the parking area.

The approx. 1,500 acres of EWNT are part the 500-acre SWEPCO Lake constructed to provide cooling water for the coal-fired plant generating electricity for NW Arkansas. During winter, temperatures in the lake average in the low 70s. This warm water is presumably the source of some interesting bird records.

The parking lot is the starting point for a trail that is 0.5 miles long (1 mile round trip). The trail is well-marked, generally level, and easily walked because of a thick bed of mulch. The first 0.3 miles include open fields and the Little Flint Creek bottoms. There is a farm to the E, and a forested ridge to the W. The final 0.2 miles includes an optional steeper path into typical Ozark woodland. The trail ends at an attractive pavilion that provides tables, an appealing overlook of part of the lake and forested ridges, and information about the flora and fauna of EWNT.

Many visitors want to see Bald Eagles, which are present during winter. The most likely time to see them is from late November through early March, and especially December and January. Eagles perch on snags out in the lake and in trees along the lake's edge. Also look for them soaring overhead anywhere along the trail. It's possible to visit EWNT and miss them. If that happens, try the lake's boat ramp: from Gentry, travel W on 12 to Cripps Road, turn S, travel about 2 miles to the boat ramp and parking area (this turn is about 1 mile west of EWNA).

Most of our visits have been in the winter. We have often found Song, Swamp, and White-crowned Sparrows in the grasslands along the trail, and Harris's Sparrow on several occasions. Eastern Bluebirds are common.

We have seen several hawk species soaring in the area, including a late July Swainson's Hawk. Always check the snags for Red-headed Woodpeckers. We have seen flocks of Great Egrets there in there in fall.



Tundra Swans in fog at EWNT 22 December 2008

Photo by Joe Neal

Mudflats are often exposed just below the viewing pavilion when the lake level is low from mid-summer into the fall. This provides habitat for shorebirds. Other interesting birds: back in the 1980s, we were all agog at discovery of a wintering Spotted Sandpiper. Terry Stanfill and Dave Nolan saw a Tricolored Heron there (around spring 2000). A flock of Willets was present for several weeks in the 1990s. In December 2003 and January 2004 we saw shorebirds on exposed mudflats. Least Sandpipers weren't unexpected since they typically winter here, but we also saw Dunlins -- rare at that time in NW Arkansas. During winter 2010-2011, there were Least Sandpipers, Killdeer, and Wilson's Snipe along the exposed edge.

EWNT opened in 1999. Local schools and youth groups have been active in the program of planting native plants, putting up boxes, and other activities beneficial to wildlife. More information about these clubs is provided on a sign near the parking lot and elsewhere along the trail. They pick a Saturday around Earth Day and get kids together to plant food plots, wildflowers, and perform maintenance. They are restoring native Tallgrass Prairie plants in the old pasture along the trail. Terry Stanfill, retired Senior Chemist at SWEPCO, remains active and involved in the project.

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