



# Potomac Eagle<sup>®</sup> Scenic Railroad

Romney, West Virginia

Written by: **Jodi Burnsworth**  
Photography by: **Lance C. Bell**

Since 1991, Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad has operated scenic rail excursions through the South Branch Valley of West Virginia. In addition to the beautiful scenery and rich history, passengers enjoy the ride along the South Branch of the Potomac River primarily for the opportunity to see American bald eagles.

The American bald eagle was adopted as our national symbol in 1782. These majestic creatures need clean water and tall, mature trees for suitable habitat. Combine that with the isolation of the Trough, the six-mile-long, steep, narrow gorge that the South Branch flows through, and this area provides the perfect home.

According to the West Virginia Division of Natural Resources, it was the spring of 1981 when the first bald

eagle nest in the state was recorded; it was discovered along the South Branch. Since then, the number of nests has increased. As of this article, there are eight documented nests.

A popular question asked of the Potomac Eagle crew is, when is the best time to see eagles? Now beginning their 27<sup>th</sup> season, they can say that over 90% of Potomac Eagle's excursions have eagle sightings. In the last several years, at least one has been seen on every trip. With such a healthy population along the route, the chances are very high that bald eagles will be seen.



**A 2016 pair of Bald Eagles at their nest along the South Branch of the Potomac River.** Photo courtesy CHIP GROSS

Bald eagles are special. They are not only rare, but they mate for life. Both male and female share responsibility for incubating eggs and feeding young. Nesting begins in late February, increasing the size of the same nests each year. Incubation lasts about 35 days. Once they hatch, the parents take turns feeding the young while the other hunts. The eaglets leave the nest 10-13 weeks later. They will not mature until four to five years old, when they attain the

adult's white head and tail feathers. Bald eagles usually return within 100 miles of where they were hatched to nest and raise their own young.

Eaglets weigh 9-12 pounds when they leave the nest. The tail, head, and body feathers are mottled brown with some white inside the wings; their talons and bill are yellow.



Adults are alike in appearance with a yellow bill and feet, black talons, golden eyes and white head and tail feathers. The female is usually slightly larger than the male. An adult bald eagle is about 2½ feet in length, with a wingspan of 6½ to 7 feet. A bald eagle's voice is a high-pitched squeaky chatter, despite their majestic appearance.

Bald eagles mainly feed on fish, but are very opportunistic. They will also eat waterfowl, small mammals, reptiles, and even dead animals, including road-killed deer. The South Branch's clear water makes it easy for the eagles to spot their prey from their perch among the tall trees and rock cliffs. Many passengers as well as crew have spotted an eagle swoop down to the water and catch a fish!

The Potomac Eagle crew helps spot eagles for passengers, slowing when eagles are spotted so everyone on board has a chance to see them. For guests that want a more open and unobstructed view, there are two observation cars. One has a roof with large open windows; it is available during the entire trip. However, the gondola car is the most popular. It is a modified freight car with no roof and benches down

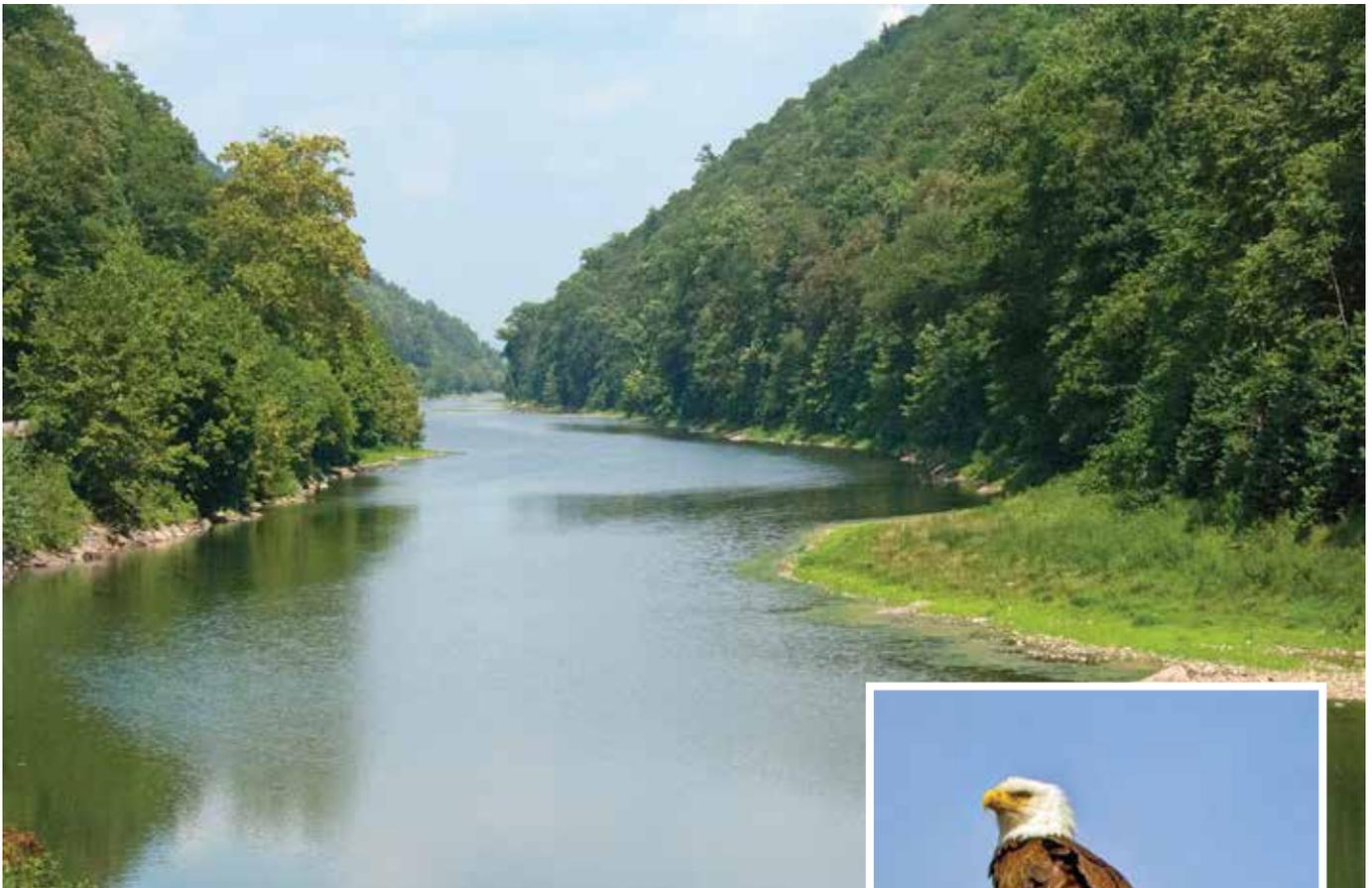


**Top photo: Passengers watch for eagles from the gondola car while traveling round the bend at "Eagle Rock" as they pass through the South Branch Trough.**

**Inset: A variety of seating and dining choices are available when purchasing excursions.**

the middle. Guests can ride in this car while traveling through the Trough.

It is no secret that bald eagles are the highlight of the trip, but other wildlife is viewable as well. The water of the South Branch is so clear that you can spot fish easily. Blue heron and deer are often seen too.



**Spectacular West Virginia scenery, as evidenced by this view of the South Branch of the Potomac River and the chance to see Bald Eagles in the wild are some highlights of the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad trips.**

**Bottom right: During the Potomac Eagle excursion an on-board narrator identifies and describes various historical sites, such as the restored 1789 Isaac Kuykendall home.**



While any time is a great time to visit the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad, they invite you to attend the Potomac Eagle Rail Fest on Father's Day weekend, June 17 and 18. In addition to regular Trough Trips, Lehigh Valley 126 steam engine will be running northbound express trips to Hanging Rock throughout both days. Free activities include Operation Lifesaver; rides on a backyard-size steam train, motor cars, and pump cars; Community Model Railroad Club of Frostburg; an antique car show on Saturday; and, a bald eagle presentation by the West Virginia Raptor Rehabilitation Center on Sunday.

For more information or to purchase tickets, visit their website at [potomaceagle.info](http://potomaceagle.info). Be sure to follow them on Facebook for the latest news and updates!

