

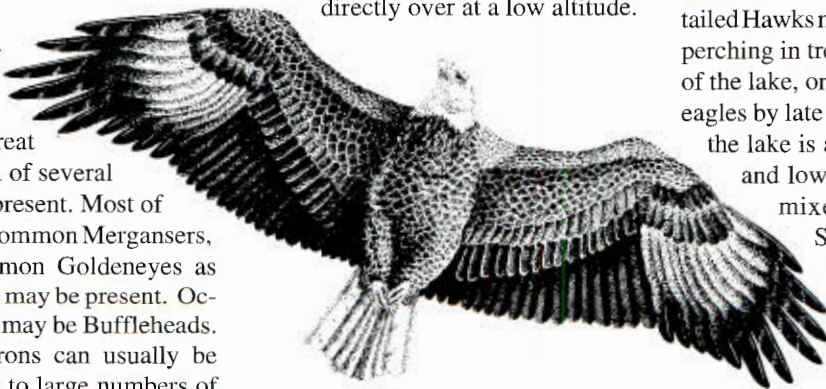
## Eagle Watching at Lake Chautauqua in Winter

By Thomas V. Lerczak

Lake Chautauqua, a backwater of the Illinois River Chautauqua National Wildlife Refuge (4,488 acres, 40 miles southwest of Peoria, Illinois) attracts many bird species at all seasons. But in my opinion, it is the presence of overwintering Bald Eagles that makes winter the most interesting season for birding here. Bald Eagles are reliably present in varying numbers from late October through March, with numbers usually highest in January. Interactions among the eagles and other overwintering birds present exciting scenes that invite speculations on the motivations behind their behaviors and generate admiration for birds that can endure the sometimes extremely harsh weather conditions.

As long as there is an expanse of open water on Lake Chautauqua, a great many waterfowl of several species will be present. Most of them are often Common Mergansers, but many Common Goldeneyes as well as Mallards may be present. Occasionally there may be Buffleheads. Great Blue Herons can usually be seen in addition to large numbers of Ring-billed Gulls, which may be flying about picking small fish (mostly gizzard shad) from the water or standing in groups on the ice. A scan of the gull flocks usually yields a few Herring Gulls.

The mergansers find a ready source of food in the abundant gizzard shad that sometimes die in large numbers due to their low tolerance for very cold water. Bald Eagles are also heavily dependent upon these shad as a main food source, and can readily be seen flying over open waters in search of fish; many, however, simply stand on the ice or perch in trees, apparently watching the ducks for signs of sick or weak individuals; attacks by the eagles, though, are rare. The Mallards tend to stay in close-knit flocks either in the water or standing on the ice. If an eagle flies over the Mallards, the entire flock may take flight. Diving ducks, for example, mergansers, appear untroubled by the eagles, even if the eagles fly directly over at a low altitude.



*Adult Bald Eagle drawing by Brian K. Willis.*

Even though food may appear to be readily available, eagles can be observed stealing food from each other and from other species. Once, for example, I witnessed a large dead fish (probably a common carp or bigmouth buffalo) pass ownership among several different eagles over the course of an hour. Gulls, which also steal food from other gulls, normally maintain a respectable distance from the formidable eagles.

Other winter birds at the Chautauqua refuge include American Crows that fly about over the lake and along the river in search of whatever they can scavenge—most likely dead fish. In late fall and early winter, Northern Harriers patrol the lake back and forth in search of prey. Red-tailed Hawks may sometimes be found perching in trees along the perimeter of the lake, or soaring along with the eagles by late morning. Surrounding the lake is a narrow strip of forest

and low shrubs that may yield mixed flocks of Swamp Sparrows, American and Eurasian Tree Sparrows, Song Sparrows, and Dark-eyed Juncos. In the forest the loosely aggregated winter foraging flocks moving among the trees in search of food may include Black-capped Chickadees, White-breasted Nuthatches, Tufted Titmice, Downy, Hairy, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers, and if you wait