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Bald Eagles on a Morning Commute

On mornings in late December, the sun rises late and the alarm clock sounds while it is still dark outside. It's tough to drag my complaining bones out of a warm bed to make my way downstairs to start water boiling for coffee. Though I've always been attracted to lands far north of Illinois, on cold winter mornings before sunrise, the last place I would wish to be are lands where the days are even shorter. So with a heavy heart and a long good-bye to my wife, I'll force myself out the door, scrape ice off my vehicle's window, set its heater on high, and, with a rapidly cooling cup of hot coffee, begin my short seven-mile drive to the office.

On the best mornings, if I am lucky, the sun's first warming rays will be amplified by snow-covered farm fields that brighten the day and help me to fully wake up. By the time I reach Havana, only three miles away, the coffee is gone; so I'll usually stop at one of several convenient stores for another cup before embarking on the final miles to work at the Forbes Biological Station northeast of town. If I have the time, I'll make a detour

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to the Illinois River and maybe even sit idle for a few minutes, reminiscing about summer canoe trips and hikes at the Emiquon National Wildlife Refuge, which can be seen across the river from Havana's Riverfront Park. It is here that I may see my first bald eagle of the morning, perching quietly in a large tree along the river's edge or flying over the river in search of the day's first meal of fish. There may also be ring-billed gulls and herring gulls. And if the floodplain lakes that flank the river are frozen, there may be common mergansers and common goldeneyes swimming and diving in whatever open water is available. But my time is usually running out, so after only a few quick moments, I'll put my car into gear and head out of town.

My route stays close to the river bluffs, and I'll typically see several more eagles by the time I reach the office. If a wind is blowing from the river, updrafts may form, and eagles will be soaring just over the treetops near the edge of the bluff. Occasionally, conditions will be just right for the wind speed to match an eagle's forward motion, and the bird will be seen hanging motionless in the sky. Upon reaching Quiver Creek, where the biological station is located, I'll listen for calling eagles as my vehicle passes over the levee leading to the parking area. They perch in the trees over the creek, which usually has quite a bit of open water, except during the longest periods of freezing weather. From my office window, it is not unusual to see an eagle fly past or even grab a fish from the water's surface.

I suspect that it would be easy to take such scenes for granted, but I fight that tendency. Because I always try to recall how the majority of Americans living in big cities commute to their jobs: traffic snarls, crowded buses or commuter trains, the pushing crowds. I was once in that situation many years ago, and I have not forgotten. But it is comforting for me to know that many folks who live where I do also appreciate the eagles. And, of course, there are those with no interest at all; but everyone is certainly entitled to their own interests...as I am entitled to mine.