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Timeless Scenes Along the Illinois River

With much of the Midwest being devoted to agriculture, an expansive highway infrastructure, and the expanding sprawl of urban areas, it is easy to think of every aspect of the landscape as being tamed and dominated by human desires and manipulations. But every once in a while, large flood events, such as the Great Flood of 1993 on the Mississippi River system, have shown us otherwise, at least for areas on the floodplain; in fact, between the big river bluffs, an ancient play of nature continues (in its fundamentals), most likely unchanged for millennia. The play involves bald eagles, which are top predators in the system, and their prey, mostly fish and to a lesser extent ducks. In Illinois, the large number of bald eagles that overwinter along the Illinois River each year from about late October to March provides an opportunity for observers to learn much about animal behavior, or at least to renew an appreciation of wild nature, unconstrained by human influences.

At Swan Lake, a backwater at the Two Rivers National Wildlife Refuge near the Illinois River's confluence with the Mississippi, for example, I

