**Wings and Wildlife in Shawnee Forest Country**

With the advent of digital photography, capturing images of birds and animals has become easier, making the pursuit more attractive to the masses.

Les Winkeler, the outdoors writer at the Southern Illinoisan in Carbondale for the past 30 years, is hoping to increase the interest in these outdoor pursuits with his new business, **Winkeler’s Wings and Wildlife.**

The goal of the business is to put birds and animals in front of wildlife enthusiasts and photographers, from aspiring to professional.

“A guide can certainly enhance your experience,” Winkeler said. “My wife and I traveled to Rocky Mountain National Park a few years ago. Our time at the park was limited to just a couple days, so we wanted to maximize our visit.

“We would have seen some of the larger critters, the elk and mule deer, without a guide. However, our guide took us into the field where we saw mountain bluebirds, green towhees and Lincoln’s sparrows that we would have driven by. Our guide also pointed us to the tiny nest of a warbling vireo. In addition, we found a mule deer still bedded down. It was an outstanding experience.”

Southern Illinois is blessed with thousands of acres of public property, from the Shawnee National Forest, two national wildlife refuges, a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers lake and state parks with a wide array of habitat.

Yet, finding wildlife isn’t as easy as hopping in a car and taking a drive.

“There are places to go in the fall and winter where waterfowl will congregate,” Winkeler said. “There are easily accessible trails that provide outstanding viewing opportunities for migrating warblers in the spring.

“Our guide experience at Rocky Mountain National Park showed me the importance of nuance, of knowing places where birds and animals are likely to be found. To me, seeing a species I’ve never laid my eyes upon before, that makes my day.”

And, adding the element of photography is a bonus.

“There is just so much natural beauty here that people aren’t aware of,” Winkeler said. “People will look at one of my photographs and say, ‘Where did you see that?” They cannot believe such beauty exists within a mile or two of their homes. Here in Southern Illinois we have the opportunity to see about 350 species of birds each year.”

Winkeler has cameras available, with lenses of up to 500 mm, for clients to capture images of their wildlife experience.

“The cameras look intimidating because of their size, but they’re really quite intuitive,” Winkeler said. “Each tour will begin with a brief tutorial on the use of cameras. Within 10-15 minutes most clients should be able to get photographs suitable for framing.”

Digital photography makes the business possible.

“When in doubt, push the button,” Winkeler said. “If the photo doesn’t come out, all you’ve done is taken up a bit of space on the card. And, there is no delayed gratification with digital equipment. If you’ve captured the moment in time where the great blue heron spears his or her breakfast, you can enjoy the photograph immediately.”

**Currently, Winkeler is offering three separate tours.**

One tour combines Sahara Woods State Fish and Wildlife Area and Glen O. Jones Lake, located within about 15 miles of each other in Saline County. This trip is geared toward song birds in the spring and forest birds in the fall. However, eagles, hawks and various species of woodpeckers are common sightings at both locations.

Another trip combines two outstanding waterfowl areas in Crab Orchard Lake and Mermet Lake. Both areas also offer possibilities of eagles, wading birds as well as deer, turkey, raccoons and other mammals. Part of the tour includes a visit to the Section 8 Boardwalk, which places visitors in the middle of a cypress swamp.

The final tour is a trip along Route 3 in southwestern Illinois. Horseshoe Lake, located in Alexander County, will normally be the centerpiece of the tour, but Mississippi River flooding will dictate changes. Horseshoe Lake is a magnet for ducks, Canada and greater white-fronted geese and trumpeter swans.

But, flood waters from the Mississippi present opportunities for view more “exotic” species such as snowy egrets, cattle egrets, American avocets and black-bellied whistling ducks. This past summer there was a large concentration of the endangered least tern.

“This final trip offers the most unique opportunities,” Winkeler said. “It is also the most unpredictable. The flood waters bring an incredible diversity of wildlife, from avocets to godwits, but conditions change rapidly.”

The tours are roughly six hours in duration. Start times are flexible, although Winkeler suggests 6 a.m. in the spring and summer and 7 a.m. in the fall and winter.

“There is no question the early bird sees the birds,” Winkeler said.

The trips are an intimate experience, limited to no more than three persons. Cost is $250 for one person, $300 total for two or three people. Cameras can be rented for $50 per day.

“Because we do a lot of viewing from the car, trips have to be limited to three people,” Winkeler said. “The vehicle frequently serves as an effective blind. Each trip will be tailored to the physical capabilities of clients. We can hit the trails if the client wants, but someone with limited physical abilities will see plenty from the car window.”

More information is available at [www.winkelerswingsandwildlife.com](http://www.winkelerswingsandwildlife.com). For an extensive collection of Winkeler’s Wildlife photography, go to Winkeler’s Wings and Wildlife’s Facebook page ([facebook.com/brdtrip](http://facebook.com/brdtrip)). For additional information, call 618-841-7862.