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## **Wildlife Highlights Lakeshore Cruises**

“We sometimes take for granted the beauty we have here,” said Justin Gage, owner of Branson Landing Marina.

BRANSON, Mo.— A voyage on the Landing Princess or Lake Queen paddle wheeler provides visitors an unparalleled opportunity to see Missouri’s wildlife including bald eagles along a 22-mile lakeshore that remains largely undeveloped.

The cruises on Lake Taneycomo are intended to be more than simple sightseeing excursions, says Justin Gage, who built the \$8 million Branson Landing Marina and owns the 96-foot luxury yacht and the 62-foot paddle wheeler.

The Gage family’s connection with the lakefront goes back generations. After the White River was dammed, tourists flocked to the area for swimming, fishing and boating. Fred Stewart, Gage’s maternal grandfather, built the original Lake Queen and operated it in the 1950’s and ‘60’s from Rockaway Beach.

The Lake Queen came to the Branson lakefront in 1973 on the spot where the new marina stands. The family also owns Gage’s Long Creek Marina on Table Rock Lake, developed by Gage’s father, the late Steve Gage.

“We sometimes take for granted the beauty we have here,” Gage said. “We’ll continue to keep history a focus of everything, to keep that promise of the waterfront, and the simplicity of the water and the wildlife that drew people to the lake to have a great time and still does.”

Lake Queen Capt. Robert Hodge said he enjoys “watching all the critters” on the 1.5 hour sightseeing trips. The cruise passes a large rookery of blue herons. A mother duck paddles upstream followed by a cluster of chicks. Hodge points out the Christian summer camp, Kamp Kanukuk.

A line of 100 geese swim past. Hodge tells passengers that a stately mansion on the shore is the former home of novelist Janet Dailey. Other homes are visible on the tall bluffs including one with a gazebo perched on the edge of the cliff.

On the return trip, someone spots a young eagle atop a dead tree. Its head feathers have not yet turned white, but it is notable for its size and majesty. Last year, one nest held three babies. This year, there are twins. Hodge slows the boat to a crawl while everyone admires the rare sight.

The Missouri Department of Conservation has counted more than 150 active bald eagle nests in Missouri. “That’s a pretty dramatic comeback,” said spokesman Francis Skalicky. “As recently as 1981, there were no active nests in Missouri. It’s a sign nature can heal itself as long as it gets a little help from us.”

Eagles remain on the state’s endangered list, and shooting an eagle or disturbing its nest is a felony, punishable with a fine of \$5,000 and a year in prison. Eagle killings may be reported in confidence by calling Operation Game Thief at 800-392-1111.

Capt. John Boltz, general manager of Branson Landing Cruises, says passengers “are overjoyed” by the wildlife. “It’s really something to see raccoons, baby fox, and I’ve watched two deer playing along shore.”

Among the passengers is Peg Hunter, visiting from Sacramento, Calif. Hunter grew up in Arkansas, but hadn’t been back for 50 years, she said. Her older siblings used to go to parties in Rockaway Beach, she said.

“I had forgotten how beautiful it is here,” she said, gazing at the passing shoreline. “You never think about all the different shades of green.”

For More Information: Advance purchase of tickets is recommended because Branson Landing cruises often sell out in advance. Visit [www.bransonlandcruises.com](http://www.bransonlandcruises.com) or call 800-979-3370. In addition to the regular cruises, there are breakfast, pizza, special event cruises and more. Weddings also are performed onboard. Branson Landing Marina is also the site for Shorty Small’s restaurant, Ben & Jerry’s Scoop Shop and more.

For additional information about the Branson/Lakes Area Chamber of Commerce and Convention and Visitors Bureau, visit [www.bransonchamber.com](http://www.bransonchamber.com) or call 800-296-0463.