

MAKING LIFE MORE FUN

Best Bird-Watching Spots

(NAPSA)—Imagine seeing a great egret for the first time with its five-foot-wide, snowy white wings and long neck, swooping to land like an earthward-bound angel. Or a majestic bald eagle soaring overhead, its capelike wings spread like an admiral of the atmosphere.

These kinds of “out of the blue” experiences have made bird-watching one of the fastest-growing outdoor hobbies in North America. And what better place to pursue it than the landscape that first inspired renowned naturalist and wildlife artist John James Audubon, who might well be considered the first “ecotourist.”

A young man of 18 when he left France for America in 1803, Audubon settled at Mill Grove, a rural spot along the Perkiomen Creek, just a few miles from Valley Forge. Here he developed his innovative methods and artistic style, painting birds and animals in life-sized, lifelike images, and began his ambitious work of documenting the wildlife of North America.

The John James Audubon Center at Mill Grove in Audubon, Pa., now a National Historic Landmark, is the only home in America that Audubon owned that is still standing. It includes a 175-acre wildlife preserve and a complete collection of his major works, including the groundbreaking and world-famous “Birds of America.” The site also provides a full schedule of bird-watching activities year-round, for every age and level of expertise.

“What surprises people the most about Mill Grove is that we have so much in such a little space,” said Linda Boice, education and museum manager. “It’s a little gem tucked away in a quiet setting,” she said. With nearly six



miles of walking trails, the grounds boast gorgeous meadows and bountiful chestnut trees, and plays host to many species of birds and wildlife. “People who walk the grounds come to relax and enjoy the serenity,” added Boice.

“Mill Grove is great for the beginning or ‘backyard’ birder,” said Antonia Nocero, Mill Grove’s outreach coordinator. “They can learn how to identify different birds and their habitats.” Those beginning birders are joining a throng that’s already 46 million strong, according to the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Nearby, the 3,600-acre Valley Forge National Historical Park includes the largest acreage of tall grass meadows in Pennsylvania, making it an ideal habitat for many species. “It’s not uncommon to see a red-tail hawk swoop down into the meadow on any given day, and there have been a number of reports of bald eagle sightings throughout the park,” said Meghan Carfioli, staff ecologist. “The park’s habitat is critical to many species of migratory birds, from raptors and shorebirds to Canadian geese,” she said. More than 250 species of birds have been sighted in the park.

For details on locations, visit www.valleyforge.org.