

Potomac Scenic Railroad Eagle

Written by **Dan Whetzel**
Photography by **Lance C. Bell**

“Come and ride our train and see where the eagles nest. We have vintage railroad equipment and spectacular scenery.”

Potomac Eagle Railroad Conductor Rodney Matheny’s invitation provides an excellent description of the three and a half hour scenic excursion train that glides through the South Branch Valley of the Potomac River in Hampshire County, West Virginia.

The Potomac Eagle’s conductor since 1999, Rodney’s friendly invitations and conversations keep passengers entertained and informed throughout the adventure that begins at Wappocomo Station, just outside of Romney, West Virginia. On seasonal weekends, hundreds of visitors arrive at the station in anticipation of boarding vintage railroad coaches. The Potomac Eagle





Co-owner and engineer Dan Snyder at the throttle during a recent excursion.

Scenic Railroad has proved to be a popular destination point for visitors because it combines historical narratives, magnificent scenery, and a friendly atmosphere into one adventure.

The Potomac Eagle's historical narrative begins with the South Branch Railroad that completed a rail line from Green Spring to Romney in 1884. In the early 1900s, a rail line was extended south of Romney. Eventually the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad assumed control of the rail lines and provided both freight and passenger services along the valley for a number of years. When the Baltimore & Ohio abandoned the South Branch section of its railroad in the mid 1970s, the state of West Virginia assumed ownership of 52 miles of the newly created South Branch Valley Railroad. Today, the South Branch Valley Railroad provides five days a week freight service to Moorefield, Romney, and Petersburg while also offering a rail connection to CSX, one of the largest railroads in the United States. The West Virginia State Rail Authority (SRA) saved the South Branch Valley Railroad from abandonment and is given credit for expanding commercial opportunities along its route. Included in the expansion of business was the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad which pulled out from Wappocomo Station for the first time in 1991. The Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad operates on track owned by the South Branch Valley Railroad.

Spectacular West Virginia mountain scenery abounds throughout the 3-hour Potomac Eagle journey.





Passengers are offered a variety of choices when purchasing excursion tickets. First class reservations include a climate controlled dining car (above), lounge, and complimentary lunch.

Facing page: The Potomac Eagle rounds the bend at “Eagle Rock” during one of its regular trips providing beautiful scenery, as well as a chance to see eagles in the wild.

Railroad enthusiasts welcome the sight of two vintage diesel F-units and two GP-9 locomotives built by General Motors Electro Motive Division in the 1950s, and the equally aged passenger coaches and dining cars when they arrive at Wappocomo Station. Six coaches and three diners, also called table cars, are in service. According to Rodney, “We have table car service and coaches for 750 passengers.”

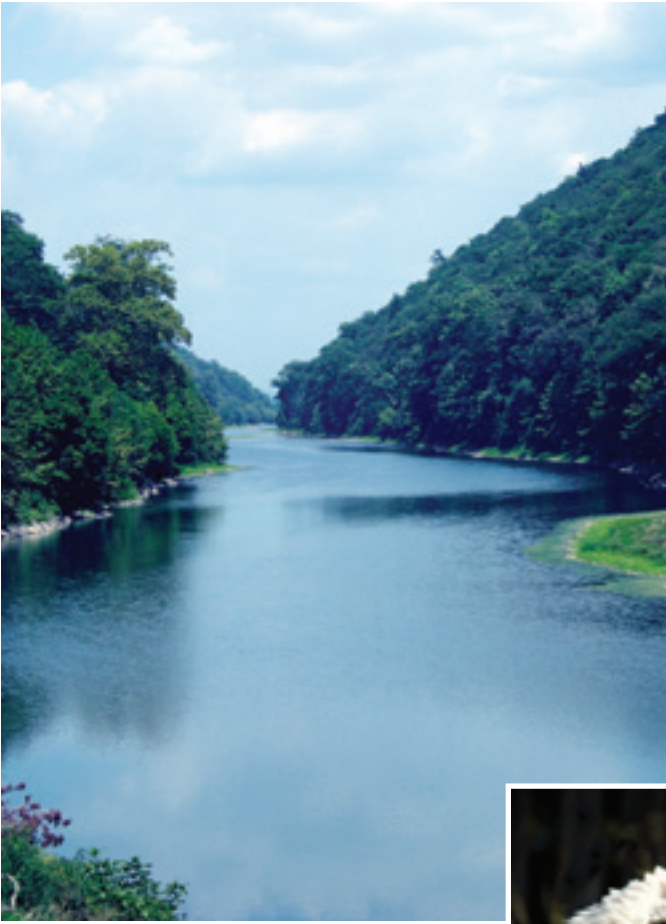
In addition to table car accommodations passengers have several choices of coach seating, including benches on an open air gondola when riding through The Trough, an observation car for panoramic photographic opportunities, and open window passenger coaches.

Historical narratives extend beyond the vintage equipment and are provided by an on-board narrator. As the train pulls from the station and the view becomes more expansive, the narrator identifies and describes Native American encampments, Revolutionary War era houses built by skilled German immigrants, early pioneer settlements, antebellum

plantations, and farms that range along the valley. Also included is the story of a Civil War encampment and rail-roading information from the 19th century.

The route leads into a six-mile narrow valley called The Trough, which is accessible only by rail or small boat. The train stops prior to entering the canyon, so that passengers may move forward into the gondola car for an unobstructed view of the river and mountains that abruptly tower above the train. The Trough is where river, sky, and valley converge into an area untouched by man. Only the train and an occasional boat are able to escort visitors into this remote section of West Virginia. The narrator also keeps a sharp lookout for our national symbol; when it is spotted cameras are called into action. American Bald Eagles can be observed resting on tree branches or swooping toward the river — passengers eagerly point in the direction of the birds. This section of the South Branch aptly provides the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad’s subtitle — the railroad “Where Eagles Soar.” Another bird often observed close





Top left: Scenic view of the South Branch of the Potomac River.

Top right: Passengers eagle watch from the open air gondola while riding through The Trough.

Below: During the Potomac Eagle excursion an on-board narrator identifies and describes various historical sites, such as the restored 1789 Isaac Kuykendall home.

to the water is the Blue Heron, whose slender silhouette contrasts with the larger and darker eagle.

Dan Snyder, co-owner of the Potomac Eagle Scenic Railroad, provides a summary of the adventures that passengers can expect. “We provide a vintage train, scenery that includes wide valleys and a narrow canyon, and friendly service. Catch the breeze and take photos from the coaches or gondola car. Feel free to enjoy the gift shop, snack bar, and other accommodations that we offer on the Potomac Eagle. And don’t forget that we also offer special excursion trains to Moorefield and Petersburg.”

Passengers are offered a variety of choices when purchasing tickets for regular or special excursions. First class reservations include a climate



controlled car, lounge, and complimentary lunch. Passengers preferring coach accommodations may pack a lunch or enjoy items from the reasonably priced on-board snack bar. A gift shop, ticket office, and restrooms are available at Wappocomo Station, located along West Virginia Route 28, one and one-half miles north of Romney. The town of Romney also offers amenities, services, and historical sites to visit.

The Potomac Eagle's once weekly Saturday runs begin in May and end in September. October marks the kick off of an expanded schedule; daily runs are scheduled Monday through Saturday and twice daily runs on Sunday for five consecutive weeks. Additional information on events and ticket information can be found by calling **304-424-0763** or writing to the ticket office at Potomac Eagle, Wappocomo Station, Route 28 North, Post Office Box 657, Romney, WV 26757, and consulting www.potomaceagle.info.

Conductor Rodney Matheny points out the Potomac Eagle's route through The Trough to passenger, Annie Whetzel.



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