

Eagles Flock Together, Humans Count Them

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Brackendale, British Columbia -- As my husband and I drove north on British Columbia's scenic Sea to Sky Highway 99 we marveled at the Howe Sound down below and anxiously scanned the sky for bald eagles above. Although we could have taken that road all the way to Whistler and its world class ski resorts, we landed one hour south in Brackendale. The Brackendale Art Gallery in conjunction with local conservation societies was hosting the 13th Annual Brackendale Winter Eagle Festival and Count. A monthlong event, the festival celebrates the arrival of more than a thousand bald eagles in midwinter.

Brackendale, which was established in 1886 and is home to 2300 residents, sits about one and a half hours north of Vancouver in the heart of the Squamish River Valley. Tucked between the jagged snowcapped Tantalus mountain range to the west and the volcanic Garibaldi Mountain to the east, the valley boasts three major glacial-fed rivers and is an ecologically rich area that is home to an array of wildlife and habitat. Ancient old growth Douglas fir and western red cedar trees, some measuring between 30 and 45 feet in circumference, dominate the dense forests of the upper valley. Black and grizzly bears continually forage for berries, roots and flowers in the forests. And, every December, hordes of bald eagles arrive from all over the northwest. Although the valley's mild climate offers some relief from colder conditions found in the area, the birds land there in order to feast on the carcasses of spawned-out chum and coho salmon that collect on the river banks.

With their snow white heads and black bodies, the eagles are a majestic sight as they dot the gray landscape and go about their business. Antisocial opportunists, bald eagles normally reside in pairs, build their nests and stake their claim to a specific territory. During the winter, however, they congregate in large numbers along the river and happily share a deciduous tree with 20 to 30 other eagles. While doing so, they use their keen eyesight, which is eight times sharper than a human's, to scan the river banks for dead fish. Once they've found a salmon, they swoop down and use their sharp talons and hooked yellow beak to devour their main meal of the day. Then, after gorging every day for about two months, the birds disperse. Nesting season is due to start, and the satiated birds head home to roost.

Although the eagles' annual visit to Brackendale has been happening for generations, only in the last decade or so has it received much notice. The man responsible is Thor Froslev, a local artist and the founder of the Brackendale Art Gallery. In 1970, he moved to Brackendale, purchased land and built his cooperative art gallery from the ground up. An avid sport fisherman, he also spent much of his spare time fly fishing in the local rivers. As hillsides were clear-cut and dikes built over the years, Mr. Froslev noticed fewer salmon in the river. Concerned about the lack of salmon and the influence it would have on the birds' return each year, he started the Annual Brackendale Winter Eagle Festival and Count in 1986. On Jan. 9, 1994, Mr. Froslev's campaign took on a new life when 3,766 bald eagles were counted and a world record was broken.

After that, Mr. Froslev and his friend Len Goldsmith strove to create an eagle reserve. With 20 private citizens and 17 organizations, the group submitted a proposal to the British Columbia Protected Area Strategy. In two years, their dream was a reality, and an 1,100-acre reserve was created along the river banks in the heart of Brackendale. Formerly crown land that was leased to a paper company and logged heavily, it is now designated a reserve and can't be used for mining, logging or development of any kind. And people are restricted from trespassing. The acreage can only be used by the bald eagles and their wildlife friends. The town, which was once home to hop ranches and pioneers, is now dubbed "The Winter Home of the Bald Eagle."

When we arrived on a rainy Saturday, we checked into the local Best Western and headed for the gallery. Terry Tobin, a wildlife biologist and environmental interpreter from Vancouver, was conducting a nature walk. Although we could have taken a rafting trip or gone horseback riding in order to view the eagles, we opted for the walk. We thought that it would be the best way to truly learn about them. Sporting Goretex and carting binoculars as well as our two children, we joined the tour and headed for Eagle Run. A designated eagle viewing site, the dike sits across from the

reserve and offers sheltered viewing areas. Immediately upon our arrival, Mr. Tobin counted 28 eagles in a single cottonwood tree. During that hour alone, 284 were counted in total.

As the birds soared overhead, Mr. Tobin quickly explained how they control their flight patterns by adjusting their primary feathers ever so slightly and using their large white tails as rudders. He also noted a brown eagle in a tree just overhead and explained that it was juvenile, because it lacked the characteristic white head, yellow beak and yellow feet. At the end of the day, Mr. Tobin explained that the birds wouldn't be sleeping in those trees for the evening, but would be heading to a nearby forest of conifers. The birds, we were told, prefer the shelter and security of the lush evergreens. And, as Mr. Tobin demonstrated how the eagles puff out their chests and tuck their heads under their wings, our four-year-old daughter took note and had a grand time imitating the bird's bedtime ritual herself. She was not happy about the trip home we had scheduled the next morning. Neither were we.

As we discovered, we were leaving just hours before the annual one-day count. When I called Mr. Froslev on Monday he reported, "Even though it was raining cats and dogs yesterday, everyone went out with a smile. When they returned later, they were grinning from ear to ear." Using only the naked eye or binoculars, 60 trained volunteer eagle counters tallied 1,847 eagles along a 17-mile stretch of the Squamish River. If the weather had been better and the clouds higher, Mr. Froslev was sure the count would have exceeded 2,000.
