



Mature Golden Eagle

Photos by The Author

(See Cover)

OREGON LAND OF EAGLES

By Jim Anderson

ONE OF THE most majestic and thrilling birds to set his wings against the sky is the eagle. Man, perhaps from his very beginning, has turned his eyes skyward to watch with admiration, and perhaps even fear, these great giants of the bird world as they sailed on the air currents supported by those huge seven foot wings. Here in the Oregon Country we have two eagle species, both of which breed and winter in various areas throughout the State. They are: The American, or Bald Eagle and the Golden Eagle.

THE AMERICAN EAGLE

The American or Bald Eagle is limited in range to the North American Continent. The Golden on the other hand ranges all through most of this continent and all about the Northern Hemisphere. The bald eagle at one time nested in great numbers on the rivers, lakes and coast of Oregon. Now, due to various circumstances, some of which we still do not understand, this eagle is disappearing as a breeding bird in our State.

The name 'bald' eagle comes from the white feathering of his head when he reaches adulthood. As he enters his breeding age the white head and huge spreading white tail

contrast with the rich dark brown body, yellow feet and beak to make him one of the most beautiful of the Raptores, the birds of prey. These great eagles, like the Golden, mate for life. However, if one of the pair should be destroyed they will seek another mate as quickly as possible.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO you could have gone to many of the lakes nestled among the snow-capped Cascades and found bald eagles nesting in the tall pines and firs along the shores. You could have gone to Government Island in the Columbia and seen a pair there feeding their young nestlings high in a cottonwood.

The mouth of the Columbia near Astoria had several nesting pair and many other places near water also held nesting eagles. But not today. If you want to find a nesting bald eagle in Oregon now you'll have to do some pretty good searching. Why?

THIS IS A QUESTION the National Audubon Society, US Fish and Wildlife Service and many other conservation organizations are asking and doing a great deal of research on. In many areas they have found that the overuse and accumulation of various pesticides are perhaps one great factor to the destruction of young birds and causing infertile eggs.

Other factors are destruction of habitat, the feeding and breeding areas of the eagles, and people — people who either kill or disturb the nesting birds. Many of the old, now unused bulky stick nests of the eagles have withstood the ravages of weather and remain silhouetted against the sky as a reminder of what greatness these birds once had. A grim reminder of what man can do when he doesn't take the time to understand some of the ways of this great natural resource . . . our wildlife.

THE GOLDEN EAGLE

The flashing and aggressive bird of the high desert country is the Golden Eagle. Not too long ago he, too, could have been found in greater numbers in other places throughout Oregon. I have sighted him in the Coast Range and near Mill City during the winter months. But now his range is pretty well limited to the eastern two-thirds of our state. He is named for the beautiful gold sheen which comes from the sun reflecting off the feathers covering the back of his head and neck. Sometimes, in an adult bird you can spot this flash of gold many miles away as he glides over the sage-covered hills.

Generally he builds his nest on the faces of sheer canyon or cliff walls of the rim rock country. Sometimes, too, they will use an old nesting aerie high in the top of an old pine snag, in both cases however, the same site is used year after year. Rebuilding the nest each year the eagle seems to want something with some distinctive feeling in the nest.

SOMETIMES I HAVE found huge limbs which weighed about 6 to 8 pounds, wrenched from a pine and pushed into the nest. Once I found a nest with newspaper, each time I threw the paper out, on my return the next day I'd find the newspaper back in. Like the bald eagle, the golden has had his troubles with man. He did not enjoy the protection of the federal law as did the bald eagle for so many years. Hence, he was hunted in just about every opportunity by the casual hunter, the professional and many ranchers. This needless to say, did not do his population any good.

In fact, conservationists became so concerned over the status of this great bird that they pushed and got a measure which now protects the Golden eagle in the same law which protects the bald. The fine is very stiff and you can also be imprisoned for molesting either species. Each year the bald as well as the golden will nest beginning about April. Usually only one young is raised, but there are records of two and sometimes three birds being hatched.

THE FOOD OF EAGLES

Eagles are the largest of the birds of prey which do actually catch their own food. The only bird larger is the California Condor found in only one area of the United States now, in southern California. It is limited to carrion only. The eagles of the desert country, the golden, take many jackrabbits, ground squirrels and other small mammals. There have been cases when they have been observed eating animals which have caused their destruction . . . lambs, calves and fawn.

However, the cases of this are in no way a problem which justifies destruction of the birds, and in most cases the animal eaten was dead or dying when the eagle discovered it. This was pointed out graphically in the case of a nest I found where the remains of a fawn were in one side of the aerie. I brought the legs and some hide back to town and after a laboratory investigation found the animal was quite weak and possibly was dead when brought in, and further investigation showed a birth defect on one leg.

THE BALD EAGLE, being a bird which nests near water, is limited to taking food which is found there. Fish is the principal diet. In one nest I observed for a long period on the

Deschutes I watched the adult birds come in with nothing but fish for their young. An interesting factor was noted in this too. A big percentage of the fish taken by the eagles as well as the fish hawks, the Osprey, ate fish which are perhaps not too well off. Many of the ones brought into the nest were trailing old lures with long lengths of fishing line and spinners which flashed in the sun. Perhaps these fish would never have lived after the line had parted leaving them to swim around with the tackle attached to their mouth. In most cases both eagles are quick to take advantage of dead animals, or ones which are about to go down.

DURING the winter months along the highway out on the high desert country you can see eagles perched along the power poles and rim rock. These birds are feeding on the road kills. This is especially true along the road from Bend to Burns and from Bend to Silver Lake and Lakeview. Here the mule deer gather in huge numbers to spend the winter in the open areas where the snow doesn't get too deep. The deer are browsers and in most cases this is the only place they can find food. A number of these animals are killed during this time, either by being struck while crossing the highway, or just natural fatality to disease, cold, lack of food or old age. During this time you can see both species of eagles feeding on this food supply. This is another good example of how Nature tends to her own ways.

IN REALITY, the pressure put on the deer herds by their natural predators, such as the eagle and other species, during these harsh lean months of winter, is, in the overall picture, good for the prey. The removal of the sick, infected, weak, old and otherwise less healthy individuals would keep them from rejoining the herd. In this way they could not infect, eat the food of, or otherwise affect the healthy individuals. In this way the breeding animals would perhaps be more to our liking . . . and the rack you put on your wall as a trophy . . . perhaps a little bigger.

There are many people, who, like myself, would suffer greatly to see the day when you could either never find an eagle . . . or just find them either in a zoo or a refuge. They should have equal rights to the great heritage which we call America, after all, they make up one of our most rich and greatest natural resources . . . WILDLIFE!

Jim Anderson is a wildlife writer and naturalist at Oregon Museum of Science and Industry.

Please turn to Page 10 for information and location form to help in gathering data on the status of the golden eagle.



Baby Golden