

Green Scene: Our Majestic Eagles

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Tourists who come to BC to enjoy our wilderness areas are typically thrilled at the sight of bald eagles soaring high above them. During early winter, eagle numbers peak in coastal areas as many birds arrive from the interior to feast on the spawned-out bodies of salmon in local creeks. At Harrison Lake and Squamish, Eagle Viewing Festivals are held every November and January, respectively. This January, Squamish celebrated its 20th annual event with a count of just over 1600 eagles. At the Harrison Lake Festival, now one decade old, up to a thousand eagles can be observed. Here in the Tri-cities, we are fortunate to be able to see bald eagles on the regular basis throughout the year although their numbers increase significantly during the early winter months. Indeed, some of the eagles observed flying along our north shore mountains are probably commuting between Squamish and Harrison while keeping an eye out for other prime salmon sites, such as the Coquitlam River, along the way.

With their characteristic white heads and tails and fierce good looks, bald eagles convey a haughty manner that belies their somewhat timid nature and fondness for smelly fish carcasses. I often wonder if they would have been chosen as the national emblem for the United States in 1782 had their true nature been understood at that time. When dead salmon are not available, bald eagles prey upon small mammals, waterfowl and shorebirds. Bald eagles, one of our larger birds, have a wingspan of up to 2 meters and weigh approximately 5 kg. As is typical for birds of prey, the female is slightly larger than the male. Juvenile bald eagles lack the white head and tail feathers that take approximately five years to gradually appear. Thus, juveniles can sometimes be a challenge to distinguish in appearance from the golden eagles that also come to the coast this time of year to take advantage of the temporary glut of dead salmon.

Bald eagles were once listed as a species at risk throughout North America because, as predators at the top of the food chain, their bodies accumulated so much DDT they were unable to reproduce successfully. DDT, a highly persistent pesticide was infamous for causing the thinning of eggshells in a large number of species. Thankfully, its use has been banned for many years in North America and most bird populations have now recovered from its ill effects. Bald eagles are no longer considered to be a species at risk in Canada although they remain on the “threatened” list in the USA.

Bald eagles nest along the coast wherever salmon, their main food source, are abundant. Typically, bald eagles seek out nest sites in tall trees with a water view. Regrettably, in urban areas many shorelines are now devoid of such trees. In the Tri-cities where some suitable nesting sites remain, we can enjoy the sight of bald eagles year-round in our own neighborhoods. Local nest sites include the head of Burrard Inlet in Port Moody’s Shoreline Park and the mouth of the

Coquitlam River in an area designated as a Wildlife Management Area in the mid 1990s. While these two sites are protected, bald eagles nesting in Port Coquitlam close to the Pitt River are in a more precarious position. Here, their nest is located on private land in an area undergoing urban development.

Without salmon returning to spawn in our local streams, we would likely have no eagles in our neighborhoods. The presence of these magnificent birds reminds us that healthy ecosystems require several key components. While salmon are a linchpin in our coastal ecosystems, other critical elements for eagle survival include a pollution-free environment and remnants of forests for safe nesting habitat. Elsewhere in the world, people may feel they need to travel to Alaska to see wild eagles soar – here, we have only to lift our eyes to local skies for such a spectacular view.