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SIDEBAR>> EXTRAORDINARY INFORMATION ABOUT GOLDEN EAGLES

- **The reason they're so named is because of their glorious nape feathers (the hackles), which are a beautiful almost metallic gold (in late afternoon angled sunlight they can virtually 'shimmer').**
- **Their twice-yearly migration patterns through the eastern fronts of the Rocky Mountains have probably been established for about 11,000 years.**
- **Naturalists only authenticated this eagle 'highway' in 1992.**
- **Although we generally crane our necks to admire eagles soaring high overhead on thermals, their hunting generally is at lower levels - mainly cruising in and running their prey down.**
- **They're not at all sociable (except as a breeding pair). On migration you may see as many as 600 in six hours (in established vantage areas). If you use the analogy of our human rush hour traffic (huge population concentration yet everyone separate and individual and unacquainted), that's pretty much the deal. Eagles, in fact, are mutually antagonistic and will kill each other given the right opportunity.**
- **Their nests can weigh up to 750 kilograms**
- **Their wingspan measures 2 – 2.3 metres; when migrating they will 'soar' along mountain ridgelines, tucking their heads in and angling their wings forward for maximum lift and aerodynamic perfection.**
- **According to writer Sid Marty, sailplane (glider) pilots riding a secondary lee wind 'wave' regularly observe migrating eagles (particularly in the fall) swinging through at heights of 2,700 – 3,000 metres. Tony Burton and Hal Werneburg respectively noticed two astonishing high flight specialists at 4,900 and 6,100 metres.**

The undergrowth alongside backcountry mountain pathways are rich now with wild strawberry and geranium leaves smudged with October's magical scarlet and crimson riches. Hikers loping up Yamuska's (near Seebe) steep climbs

inhale nature's gift of sun-scorched pine needles from young lodgepole on this windless, and perfect fall day. Brazen razed ravens soar and dive-bomb, raucously croaking, along the vertical limestone cliffs some 85 million years ancient while overhead is deeply, richly, impossibly cerulean blue.

Watch carefully, though, high overhead - and the first of the day's golden eagles (*Aquila chrysaetos canadensis*) will begin to swing through, migrating southwards from their summer breeding grounds in Alaska, the Yukon and the Northwest Territories to winter ranges as far south as Mexico. Today's conditions are ideal as both adult and juvenile birds (they take up to six years to reach breeding maturity) glide from one heat-hazed thermal to the next along Alberta's eastern front range Rocky Mountains. Atmospheric 'lee' wind waves (aided and abetted by our unique Chinook winds patterns) help too, extending sometimes for hundreds of kilometres. Fall migration runs between end August right through to mid-December, while spring patterns run mid-February through until late May. In the spring, more may detour eastwards momentarily along the foothills to hunt along now vanished buffalo grazing grounds, fuelling their ever-present hunger with Richardson ground squirrels, jack rabbits and snowshoe hares.

Peter Sherrington, formerly an oilpatch geologist of international experience and now rated as one of North America's acknowledged eagle specialists as a semi-professional ornithologist and naturalist, first documented a possible 'highway' in 1992 while out on a Kananaskis spring hike in Kananaskis with friend, naturalist and interpretative guide Des Allen. Very much a details man, Sherrington and the Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation (which carries on his work), authenticated others-before-him belief that such a route existed (notably the Dutch-born ornithologist Dick Dekker).

His bearded face creases wryly, remembering, as he grins, little realizing that day that his life then was about to change forever.

"I heard a pine grosbeak," he recalls, "and a lovely song. I remember taking my glasses [binoculars] and searching the tops of the trees for it, then saw this dot in the air, beyond the grosbeak and said to Des, oh look, there's a golden eagle there, soaring."

Half an hour, lurching on sandwiches and meticulously entering their find, they looked up and noticed another golden. Then two more close by. "Three golden eagles would signify a flight," remarks Peter, "they're so territorial [each would have a hunting territory of up to 150 square miles], they wouldn't tolerate each other. We continued walking through the forest, and every time we looked up, there were more; by the time the day finished we had 102 or 103 without even trying."

He leans forward across the table, still savouring the memory. "I was," his eyes narrow with a storyteller's relish, "babbling like an idiot all the way home; it

reminded me, “ he explains, “of what I’d seen in one of the world’s biggest raptor movements, between Jordan and Israel through the Dead Sea rift, where all the birds that enter Africa come up through that valley.”

“I speculated,” he elaborates, “whether the birds would come back. At all major raptor sites in the world, birds that concentrate in the spring are never seen at the same place in the fall, they always take a different route back.” In the Old World, though, there’s no ‘leading line’ (unlike Alberta’s very distinct front range mountains) but migratory birds utilize weather systems as their guiding line, or coastal and water configurations.“

Sherrington’s meticulous banks of data over subsequent years (last fall 3,643 eagles were recorded, with 3,380 earlier in the spring) indicate declining numbers. He cites expanding human populations into formerly rural areas, plus massive housing developments in turn affecting eagles’ prey species. Add in drought, overhead wires, actual climate change (always significant for top-of-the-food-chain predators) and ever increasing pressure on the Northern Wildlife Reserve in Alaska and you have a species struggling to adapt to overwhelming changes.

Throw in the fact that these north-breeding eagles also calibrate to the ten-year breeding loop of the snowshoe hare (their main diet staple) - a well-established conundrum first noted by Hudson Bay fur traders in the 1600s and recorded in immaculate copperplate in their Winnipeg archives – and Mother Nature’s cause and effect policies on this score seem, to the human mind, still incomprehensible. Standing atop a razor sharp ridgeline, I begin to marvel at life’s complexities, the seemingly impossible mysteries. Today’s perfection is not just an eagle swooping high overhead, but of everything interconnected, and of which we are contributors too.

SIDEBAR>> Nests are huge - comfortably made of twigs, branches, sometimes lined with feathers and scraps of fur – and returned to through generations.

Egg incubation takes around 40-45 days, and to fledging status (with the chick flying) another 70-80. There are two eggs, laid and hatched 48 hours separately; the second effectively is Mother Nature’s insurance policy should the first chick be of less than ‘I am a Survivor’ status. The older down-covered chick, gruesomely, will begin attacking and pecking its sibling to death by about the 10-day mark; a remarkable 50% of even these will later succumb and die to account for an extremely high juvenile mortality – some in part to illegal international eagle feather smuggling. A juvenile golden eagle will have a white tail, and varying degrees of white in their primary colours, almost roundels underneath their open flight wings – and why Plains Indians often called them ‘spotted’ eagles. Golden eagles are related not so much to bald eagles (a fish or sea eagle) but more

closely to red-tailed and Swainson's hawks. They are the largest birds of prey in North America (the Californian condor is an eater of carrion and classified, in fact, as being related to the stork family).

SIDEBAR>>In addition to Canmore's popular **FESTIVAL OF EAGLES** (a now well-established October event), the **ROCKY MOUNTAIN EAGLE RESEARCH FOUNDATION** welcomes visitors, school groups and volunteers (for details click onto www.eaglewatch.ca), and supports workshops (sometimes at long time supporter University of Calgary venues, and throughout Alberta).

Sponsorship by Calgary company and pipeline specialists Enbridge Inc has enabled this registered charity to extend to one other temporary Crowsnest location for further research (where it's believed the two migrating 'streams' of eagles co-join before splitting again), as well as the long established Mount Lorette observation site (located close to the Nakiska ski hill, and with wheelchair access). In addition to recording eagle data, the Foundation's hugely entertaining field notes include observations of over 275 bird species, plus muskrats and local wildlife – visiting alongside these avian enthusiasts can be a truly magical outing.

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