

Wings Over Squamish

In one of the largest gatherings of its kind, bald eagles converge on the B.C. town of Brackendale in the Squamish Valley to feast on chum salmon returning to spawn.

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An hour's drive north of Vancouver, the town of Brackendale is either blessed by the lush abundance of its surroundings or cursed by the nebulous clouds that smother the old-growth forest and inundate drainpipes with more than two metres of rain a year. For the thousands of bald eagles that converge here each winter, though, nothing really matters but the salmon.

This is sea-to-sky country, where distinctions are often hazy. Brackendale lies in a misty junction of ocean, river and forest beneath the blue glaciers of the Tantalus range. Water is the principle element; it helped form the topography, sheering off mountainsides with the retreat of the last ice age. The steep walls of the Squamish Valley watershed drain into Howe Sound through a system of wide, shallow riverbeds along the valley floor. The system is ideally suited for spawning salmon -- and eagles from all over the western continent know it.

The chum start running in the fall, flooding the rivers and streams of their birth after four years at large in the Pacific. As they thrash and gasp against the current, their struggles attract the sharpest gaze in the animal kingdom. Bald eagles begin arriving en masse in late November; they stay until mid-February, resulting in one of the largest congregation of its kind on Earth.

They perch dozens to a tree, crowding the cottonwoods that line the Squamish River on the west end of town. In an age of diminishing returns, this river continues to host prolific numbers of chum salmon. Their presence fills the air with the smell of rotting fish, for the salmon are literally decomposing as they swim. Every so often, an eagle jumps from its branch and swoops in, the two-metre wingspan audible against the air, and because the salmon are too large to carry -- or perhaps because there's no need for secrecy in the midst of such abundance -- the raptors tend to linger over their meal in the ankle-deep water. They clutch the fish nonchalantly between sharp yellow toes and stare down the gulls that hover for leftovers.

The river may provide the best scenery, but nature has a way of seeping into Brackendale's streets and alleyways as well. Take a walk through town -- what seems like a wet ditch on the side of the road turns out to have a 10-kilogram salmon floundering around, wondering where it went wrong. Look up, and you might see an eagle contemplating the sparse traffic along Judd Road from a telephone pole.

The annual spectacle is drawing a growing number of onlookers, and locals take pride in hosting the Brackendale Eagle Festival, an informal celebration of their feathered friends that lasts through December and January. An interpretive centre springs up along the Government Road Dyke, the most popular eagle-watching spot in town. Adjacent businesses beckon aficionados with names like the Eagle Run Coffee Company and Eagle's Nest restaurant. Rafting companies offer the sublime experience of floating silently through the eagles' midst beneath the moss-covered limbs of the rain forest.

The eagles may be everywhere, but they are not, apparently, countless. Since 1985, the first Sunday in January has heralded the Brackendale Winter Eagle Count. Volunteers are dispatched to 20 counting posts along the river; the tally regularly tops 2,000. This year, a strong chum run suggests that eagles will once again outnumber Brackendale's 1,500 residents.

No one has devoted more energy to the marketing -- and with it, the protection -- of Brackendale's totem than the inexhaustible Thor Froslev. A gruff Danish immigrant with a penchant for expletives, Froslev can usually be found at the Brackendale Art Gallery, which he owns, operates, and lives in.

The BAG, as it's affectionately known, is a whimsical monument unto itself, a sprawling log cabin-ish affair that continues to evolve 33 years after Froslev started building it in 1971. The statue of a white unicorn marks its presence beneath the sweeping cedars off Government Road. A multi-faith chapel, also built by Froslev, stands to one side, replete with the paraphernalia of Islam and Christianity, Judaism and Tao.

The gallery itself doubles as a tea house and triples as a theatre. What Froslev wanted was a venue for all the arts Brackendale could muster, and since opening in 1973 the BAG has hosted everyone from Bernie Benthall to David Suzuki and even Robert Bateman, Canada's premier wildlife artist.

But for December and January, the focus is exclusively on eagles. Daily slide shows and eagle art fill the broad-beamed gallery. Each weekend, speakers from diverse backgrounds pontificate on all things eagle. The gallery serves as headquarters for the annual count, and on any day other than that first Sunday of the new year, visitors looking to explore beyond the dike can ask Froslev for an "eagle walk," and he'll lead them as far up the valley as they care to hike.

His most recent endeavour is now under construction in the backyard: a ramshackle Eagle Tower that will house, among other things, a clinic for sick and wounded raptors. At just over three storeys high, it's going to be the tallest building in town.

In 1996, Froslev called one of his many acquaintances, B.C.'s then-premier Glen Clark, and persuaded him to set aside 755 hectares of prime eagle territory. The Brackendale Eagles Provincial Park is protected from all logging and development, leaving the old growth intact for the eagles, and the waterways unsullied for the salmon.

Unfortunately, the local ecology depends on the integrity of a system extending far beyond local control. The threats are numerous. Both Wal-Mart and the Olympics are coming, for example, but perhaps most worrisome of all is what's happening farther away in the open Pacific.

Many people are worried that Pacific salmon may be headed for the same fate as the Atlantic cod. Ken Wilson, a consulting biologist for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, notes that while the chum stocks feeding the eagles are relatively strong, overfishing has placed species such as sockeye and coho in grave danger. "If stricter limits aren't imposed," he says, "we're going to have a cascade effect in which the salmon disappear one species at a time. It may not happen overnight the way it did with the cod, but the result will be the same."

Meanwhile, it isn't just eagles and restaurants that depend on salmon runs, but the forest itself. The importance of what might otherwise be just another fish is illustrated by a physical migration that extends into the very trees.

A salmon's journey doesn't end when it dies, but continues through the digestive tracts of the myriad creatures who come to the river to eat. As they

wander through the woods, the stuff of salmon is dispersed across the forest floor. Salmon end up fertilizing the ferns and firs whose roots, in turn, hold riverbanks in place. Perhaps a more accurate word than fertilize is becoming: Recently, scientists discovered the presence of salmon-specific isotopes in the molecular structure of coastal pines.

The eagles may yet return the favour. Their presence brings a bigger crowd each year. As their fan base grows, one hopes, so do their hopes for the future. Molecular isotopes may not provoke much sympathy, but the sight of a bald eagle soaring just past arm's reach is something that rarely fails to inspire.