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Short Trips: Raft tour is a front-row seat to eagle-watching

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SPECIAL TO THE P-I

It took me a little longer than everyone else to see the eagles.

To everyone's merriment, I excitedly pointed out the first one I saw; it was perched on a logjam.

Then I realized that the white-headed eagle shared the logs with six dark-colored juveniles. And in the tree behind, there were another eight adults.

Gradually, I began to process what I was seeing. Hundreds of eagles were perching, feeding and soaring along the snowy banks of the Squamish River.

As we spotted group after group, our raft drifted down the river at a leisurely pace. We floated past two fishermen in hip waders and watched them cast for spawning chum salmon. Mist rose off the water while the Tantalus Mountains provided a snow-capped backdrop.

Initially, the suggestion of a midwinter rafting trip on the Squamish sounded too cold to be fun. I visualized freezing my way down rapids -- catching the odd glimpse of an eagle through icy spray.

My 5-year-old daughter, Maia, was even more apprehensive. She became fixated on a photograph that she had come across -- an overturned raft with its passengers flung into frothing water.

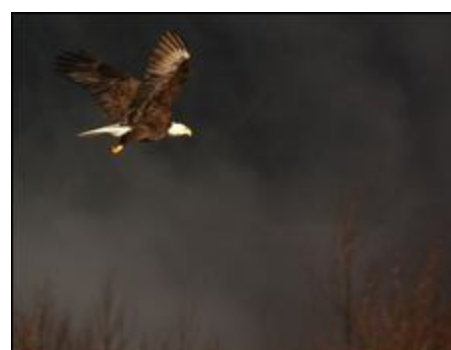
But instead of white-water excitement, it turned out that the trip is called the Eagle Float for good reason.

These raft trips -- one of the best ways to see the famous Brackendale eagles -- are family-friendly, half-day adventures. From November through February every year, along the Squamish and Cheakamus rivers in Squamish, the largest concentration of bald eagles in the world gathers to feed on spawned-out salmon.

People travel from all over to take in the magnificent sight -- typically using viewpoints along the dyke in the Brackendale area.

But rafting gives visitors a whole new perspective. As we meandered down the river, there was plenty of time to study the eagles, watch their interactions and learn about their behavior from our guide.

After meeting at the Sunwolf Outdoor Centre, my husband, Evan, Maia and I joined two other participants, Klavdi and Randy, and our guide, Shelagh Thompson, aboard a bus. A 10-minute drive took us to the launch point. Crunching over the snow and ice, we stumbled and slid as we maneuvered the raft down to the river.



zoom

JEFF LARSEN

A bald eagle on the wing near Brackendale, B.C., north of Vancouver.



zoom

SUNWOLF OUTDOOR CENTRE

Three adult bald eagles squabble with a seagull over a chum salmon carcass.

After a quick lesson in paddling skills, we launched the boat. It was the mountains that first caught my eye. Mount Alpha rose up from the river, its densely forested slopes blanketed with fresh snow.

Then I started to see the eagles.

I've seen eagles in groups of three and four before. Occasionally I've even seen as many as eight or 10 together. But what happens in Brackendale is difficult to take in. For the first few minutes, we took turns pointing out large groups of eagles, then we stopped, awed. Eagle calls whistled shrilly through the air and, as we silently floated, I heard the whoosh of beating wings on takeoff.

Despite the December overcast, the rain held off, making the day perfect for eagle viewing. Dressed in fleece layers, tall rubber boots, hats and mitts, we were cozy as the raft floated with the current.

Occasionally Shelagh would ask us to paddle when we drifted too closely to the eagles. Although there are no official guidelines, a volunteer at the Eagle Run viewing center explained that good eagle ethics mean you don't raft until after the morning feed and you stay well clear of the bank they favor.

Still, we were as close as I've ever been to a wild eagle. Maia pointed out two that were squabbling over a salmon carcass. The battle was stately, yet ridiculous -- just beside the dueling pair were at least four more salmon. Maia opted to root for the juvenile in the fight; she contended that the youngster found the salmon and it was "finders keepers."

The phenomenon of the Brackendale eagles is equally beautiful and tragic. Eagles likely have been congregating at the confluence of the Squamish, Cheakamus and Mamquam rivers for a millennium, though not in their current large numbers.

However, diminished salmon stocks in other rivers and the logging of their fragile habitat caused this famous concentration of eagles to reach an astonishing peak of 3,769 in January 1994. The successful conservation of the surrounding 1,500 acres means that, for now, the raptors continue to thrive.

As we drifted down the river I counted, reached 40 or 50 birds, then lost count, again and again.

Along with the eagles, we shared the river with trumpeter swans, mergansers and comical seals. The seals would float along side, then dive, only to pop up with a splash a minute later in an unexpected place. Their playful puppy-dog eyes mirrored Maia's giggles, and it looked like they were having as much fun as we were.

Their play contrasted well with the eagles -- laughter and beauty contrasting with a heavy feeling of concern. As we drifted, Shelagh told us that the salmon run was much smaller than it should be. Maia asked me what would happen to the eagles if the salmon stopped coming.

I didn't answer.

As the trip came to an end, Maia looked at the bus waiting for us on one riverbank, then looked back to the eagles on the other.

"This is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen, I need to remember it," she said, staring hard.



zoom

JEFF LARSEN

People travel from all over to take in the views of bald eagles in the Brackendale area.



zoom SUNWOLF OUTDOOR CENTRE

Raptors, such as this juvenile, help make 2007 an above-average year for eagle viewing.

Looking from the eagles to her small face, filled with reverence and wisdom, I had to agree.

If you go

- **Getting there** -- Drive time to Squamish, B.C., from Seattle is 3.5 hours. (Sunwolf is 8.5 miles farther on.)
- **Sunwolf Outdoor Centre** -- Offers half-day Eagle Floats for about \$84 per person. Visitors also have the options of combining the raft trip with a night in the newly renovated riverside cabins for \$114. For information call 877-806-8046 or visit sunwolf.net.
- **Eagles from the riverbank** -- You also can see the eagles from several stationary viewing areas. The main "Eagle Run" viewpoint is on the municipal dyke on Government Road in Brackendale. Exit Highway 99 at Mamquam Road and head north on Government Road to the viewing area. An interpretive program explains the eagle and salmon life cycle, and visitors get an up-close view through telescopes. Volunteer interpreters are on hand each weekend until early February.
- **More information** -- Call the Visitor Information Center in Squamish, 604-892-9244. For information on activities of the Brackendale Winter Eagle Festival, call the Brackendale Art Gallery at 604-898-3333 or visit brackendaleeagles.com.



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