

Enter the Realm of the Golden Eagle

By David H. Ellis. 2013. Hancock House, 19313 Zero Avenue, Surrey, BC, Canada, V3S 9R9. 496 pages, 60.00 USD, Cloth.

When David asked me to write a short reminiscence about an experience with a Golden Eagle and to provide a photograph, I cheerfully complied. I expected in return a small, simple, uncomplicated book. Wow! What a surprise! In the mail came a massive, 4.7 pound, hardcover, 496 page book with 18 chapters and an epilogue. It contained over a hundred stories by 48 authors from 20 countries, superb colour photographs of beautiful eagles and gorgeous scenery by 21 photographers, and paintings by 15 artists. Based on world-wide adventures that include Siberia, Mongolia, South America and Scotland, David Ellis wrote 60 of the 93 sub-chapters himself.

Published by Hancock House, and sold by Buteo Books and the American Birding Association, this tome was printed superbly in South Korea. David's Introduction explains his approach: "Eagle researchers tend typically to be terse, having been bruised and battered into this mold by reviewers and editors. They wrote less, so I wrote more. ... In this volume, I place the eagle within reach ... Welcome to the realm of the Golden Eagle. May you never escape its grasp." Readers will learn about the major eagle writers of all time. References are provided at the end of each chapter.

For the reader's interest, David includes a biographical note about each contributor. He tells a story about Al Harmata, the six foot five, 245 pound giant who lost his left leg and left arm in Viet Nam. Imagine the consternation decades later, on a trail in Wyoming, when Al saw a large female Golden Eagle perched in a sage bush and yelled "STOP THE TRUCK." The tech driving the truck said "You can't catch that eagle." But Al hopped on one leg (he cannot run) between the five- to seven-foot high sage plants, his empty sleeve flapping in the breeze. Al had noted that the large female eagle had a full crop, was in a confined space, and there was no wind. To the tech's astonishment, Al emerged with a healthy, wild Golden Eagle cradled in his right arm, ready to be banded.

David also tells of Adam Watson, only 13 years old and holidaying in Deeside, Scotland in 1944, who cycled to meet the famous Golden Eagle author, Seton Gordon. Gordon took him on a long hike to show him the eyries he had been watching since the early 1900s. In subsequent years the two of them compiled 70 years

of Golden Eagle observations.

Many facts are of biological interest. David visited a Golden Eagle nest that was seven meters deep in Sun River, Montana. Another nest in Montana contained 35 uneaten ground squirrels.

Three of a number of once-in-a-lifetime experiences are worthy of special mention. Maurice Broun, the first warden at Hawk Mountain, Pennsylvania, observed a Golden Eagle pluck a hawk, in this rare instance a Red-shouldered Hawk, from the air in migration. Martin Tjernberg in Sweden watched a Gold Eagle pursuing a hare; when the hare jumped four feet in the air, where the eagle sank its claws into it and held on for twenty seconds until the hare was dead. Herman Lovenskiold, in Norway during the "lemming irruption year" of 1891, found three almost fledged eaglets and two downy young eaglets in the same nest; several explanations are offered.

Rarely, a prey animal can kill an eagle. A Golden Eagle in Scotland captured a stoat, lifted it in the air; then the eagle dropped suddenly to the ground as if shot. The stoat had severed arteries in the eagle's throat causing its death in the air. In Scotland a Golden Eagle captured a Wild Cat, *Felis sylvestris*, and carried it upwards for several hundred feet before the mangled corpse fell to the ground. The next day the eagle was found nearby, disembowelled by the cat's claws or teeth while airborne.

Some eagle watchers have shown interest in the many-centuries-old Native American practice of digging a pit to catch eagles to obtain ceremonial head-dress feathers. A Hidatsa Indian would sit for hours or days cramped in a pit, with bait consisting of a rabbit and a deer lung above him; when the eagle pounced, the First Nations man would raise each hand quickly to grasp both legs of the eagle simultaneously. William S. Clark wished to test this firsthand and flew from New Jersey to Los Angeles to try his luck in the pit built for this purpose north of the city by Peter Bloom. Clark caught two Golden Eagles in one session.

Beware; the reader is exposed to the gory details of kills. I will mention only a few examples. Some eagles in Scotland learned to drive large prey over a precipice, to be consumed at the bottom of the valley. Eldon Bruns in Alberta watched an eagle dig its talons into the back

of a 70-pound pronghorn fawn for 20 minutes until the fawn died of exhaustion and shock. Golden Eagles in a Himalayan valley attacked demoiselle cranes, but only 4 of 67 attacks were successful. Ellis was particularly interested in the use of Golden eagles in Mongolia as a treasured falconry bird which can kill a wolf eight times its weight.

I have minor quibbles. David's enthusiasm causes him to describe the actions of three **captive** eagles across the length of 19 subchapters, somewhat excessive for my fancy. Because of the weight of the book,

older people may find it more comfortable to read the book a chapter at a time, with it propped up on a table. David enlisted dedicated proof-readers but apparently no Canadians were involved, since the French word *coulee* is spelled *coolie* on page 378.

Enter the Realm of the Golden Eagle will make a fine gift for a falconer, eagle bander or obsessed eagle watcher. For most, the illustrations alone will be worth the price of this already subsidized book.

C. STUART HOUSTON

863 University Drive, Saskatoon, SK, Canada, S7N 0J8