

## EAGLES AND OTHER BIRDS

### Eagles and Ospreys

When we first bought our property in 1980, there were ospreys regularly patrolling the waters off our beach. Fishing one day in our little blue boat (eight feet long), I heard a great splash behind me. That was encouraging — a salmon jumping. I could see the ever-expanding rings in the water. And then, out of these rings emerged this large bird, with a salmon. What a sight! I realized it must be an osprey. I had heard about these birds and read about them, but this was the first time I had ever seen one in action. I became an “osprey man” overnight. They are interesting birds to watch. Every time they rise out of the water with a fish, they do two things: first, they shake off the water, like a dog does, to get rid of the excess weight; and, second, they spin the fish around so its head is facing forward, giving less air resistance in flight.

The ospreys were successful in catching a fish on 60 percent of their attempts. In later years, as the salmon became scarce, the percentage went way down. My interest in ospreys dropped when the eagles began nesting in the tree behind our house. Thinking about it later, I realized my waning interest in ospreys was simply because they weren't around any more. The eagles had displaced them. The two are not compatible. This became obvious one summer when an osprey was bold enough to fish directly in front of our house. It plunged into the water and came up with a fish, but both our eagles dove



Osprey  
Photo: Werner Eller



Our eagle in the "Peters Tree".

"When the eagles are away, the herons will play".

A few days after the eagles had migrated the heron was bold enough to land in their favorite perch, the Peters' Tree.

on it immediately, forcing it to drop the fish and make a hasty escape. There is just no point in fishing in eagle territory. In the last few years, only one osprey family has remained on Hornby Island.

## Eagles and Herons

Great Blue Herons are another bird as large as eagles, with stilt-like legs, a long neck and a long pointed beak. They spend hours wading in shallow water, spearing small fish with their beaks. If disturbed, they let out agitated grunting noises, like a grumpy old man. They are immaculately clean; after swallowing a fish, they swish their beaks back and forth in the water until thoroughly clean. At their other end they are not so

delicate. There is a general rule: never walk under a heron's nest without an umbrella.

For a large, lumbering bird, herons are amazingly manoeuvrable. I watched our two eagles dive down on a passing heron. It was like fighter planes attacking a bomber. My heart sank. The poor heron didn't have a chance. But at the last moment, the heron changed directions, and the eagles went whistling by, missing by five feet. They curved around for a second run, and then called it off. Herons aren't that easy to catch, so why bother?

The eagles had greater success on another occasion. Dante, across the island, told me about herons raiding her goldfish pond and how she had bought a life-sized plastic heron that she planted at the edge of the pond. Other herons stay clear, recognizing that the pond has already been claimed. Soon after, an eagle flew towards her property, closer and closer, and lower and lower. And it kept coming. It snapped up the plastic heron and flew towards the sea. Realizing its mistake, the eagle dropped the heron, and Dante was able to recover her precious guardian of the pond.

The herons had a large heronry at Tralee Point, a mile south of here. I visited it when it was at its peak in size — about 45 active nests. It sounded like a zoo. The young (up to four per nest) were screaming for food, especially when the parents arrived. The young by that time were as large as their parents and were savagely pushing and pecking each



other in the battle for first feeding. The following year, the eagles began raiding these nests and took most of the young. After several years of this predation, the herons deserted this heronry and moved into two smaller breeding colonies in a densely forested area, but the eagles got them there as well. In

recent years, many heronries around the Georgia Strait have been struggling for the same reason.

Many believe that the devastation of the heron colonies is related to the collapse of the Georgia Strait salmon stocks — that herons have become a substitute food for the eagles when they could no longer get salmon. Others think it is part of the long-term cycles of nature; recently the eagle population has gone up and the heron population down. There is a tendency to think of the recent heron population as being the “normal” balance. Standing back at a distance, however, there is another interpretation — that the recent heron populations have been abnormally high, because the eagle populations have been unnaturally low. In the 1960s and 1970s the eagles throughout North America were decimated by the use of DDT, allowing a population explosion of herons. Now that the eagles are recovering to their normal numbers, the herons are being reduced to their normal numbers.

But at what point in history do we arrive at the “normal” balance? Of course, the greatest imbalance of all is the population explosion of the human species, accompanied by the decimation of almost every other species in the world. The obvious answer would be to encourage birth control, but that appears to be a taboo topic, so I’m not even going to mention it!

## Eagles and Turkey Vultures

In the summer there are almost as many turkey vultures on Hornby Island as bald eagles. After wintering in California and Mexico, the vultures arrive at Hornby in early April and stay until the end of September. Both eagles and vultures feed on carrion, but vultures are far superior at sniffing out dead animals. Several years ago a bear swam to Hornby Island and quickly developed a taste for sheep. It killed one on a neighbouring farm, and within two hours several vultures were circling overhead. Two days later, the bear killed another

sheep on the other side of the island and the vultures were there also. In situations like this, the vultures are the “first responders,” with the eagles providing later cleanup duties.

Since the eagles and vultures eat much of the same food, you would think there would be constant battles between the two, but this does not happen. One day a friend, Jack Hansed, asked me, “Who is tougher, an eagle or a vulture?” By the cunning smile on his face, I knew he had the answer. “The eagle, of course,” I answered.

He explained that there was a dead seal on his beach. The vultures were feasting on the carcass and the eagles were standing around as onlookers. Obviously then, vultures are tougher.

Not wanting to accept this, I offered another interpretation (or rationalization). The eagles had probably been there first, and only after they had their fill did they step aside to let the vultures at it. Jack didn’t accept this interpretation.

Two weeks later, I noticed one of our eagles perched in the Peters’ Tree. I threw a fish on the beach below, but the eagle showed no interest. Then two vultures circled along the beach, getting closer and closer. Aha, I thought, I’ll soon have proof of who is tougher. Both vultures landed next to the fish and began feeding. I couldn’t believe it. “Are you going to put up with this?” I asked the eagle. “It’s your fish, you know. It’s your territory!” But, still no reaction. Oh dear! Will I have to confess this to Jack? Our eagle finally dropped down to the beach near the vultures and stepped forward. The vultures stepped back and flew away. All very delicately done — not an impressive show of dominance. Eagles and vultures seem to avoid a showdown, and the question, “Who is tougher?” has yet to be answered. (I still think that eagles are tougher.)

## Eagles and Geese

Until recently there were few Canada geese around Hornby

Island, but they have been on the increase. These tough and aggressive birds show little fear of eagles; I don't know why they are so bold. Their beaks seem more suitable for nipping grass than tearing flesh, and their feet seem more suitable for paddling in water — nothing like the eagles' sharp talons. I believe, however, that their wings can be formidable weapons, used for slashing karate chops. Whatever it is, the eagles pay them great respect. Geese will often swim within four or five feet of an eagle, not showing the least concern.

The geese have nests somewhere in Hidden Bay, to the right of our house. Early every summer, the geese come out of the bay showing off their new families. The male is in front, followed closely by five or six goslings, and the female brings up the rear. In some years, there are several families making an appearance, but always in that same protective formation. There is still no hassle with the eagles as long as the family is healthy and intact.

One summer, one of the goslings was always straggling. Later, when the other goslings were learning to fly, this one was unable to do so. When the family flew to another part of the beach, it could only swim after them, arriving ten minutes later. After a few days, it was no longer seen. Although adult

Photo: Ben Kramer



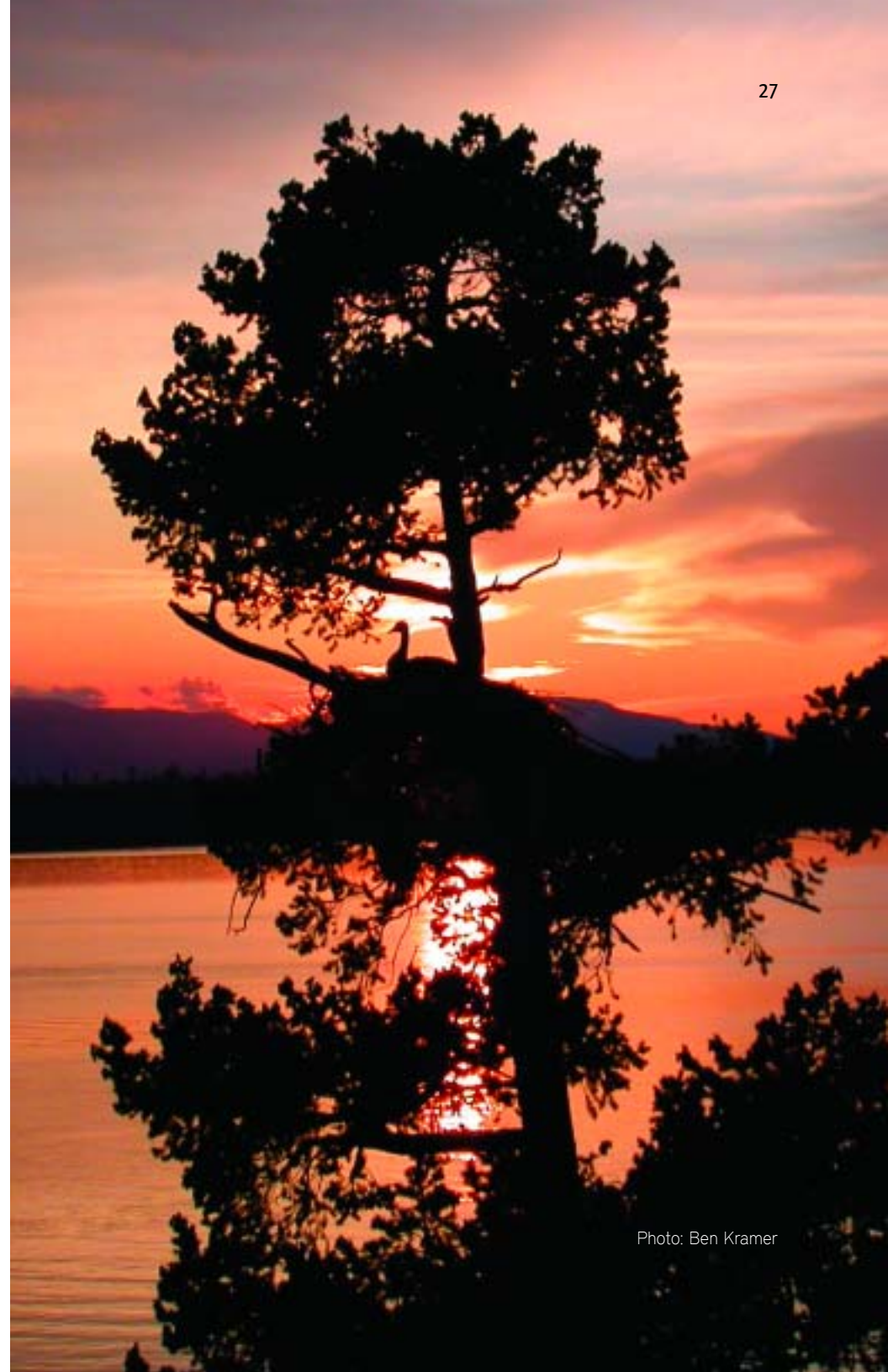


Photo: Ben Kramer

geese can defend themselves effectively, goslings are vulnerable. Every year, the eagles catch one or two goslings.



An unusual thing happened at Bradsdadsland, the home of Ben Kramer and his famous eagle nest. After using this nest for eight years, the eagles moved to a new nest further inland. I kept an eye on the abandoned nest, watching to see if such nests were ever re-occupied by the original family or by new families. Two years later, I spotted what looked like a Canada goose in the nest. I couldn't believe it. I thought that Ben Kramer had put a decoy in the nest for a joke, but was assured by others that it was a real goose. Then I saw Ben, who knew all about it. He explained that the Canada geese had used the nest the previous year also. But the nest is 80 feet above the ground. How do the goslings get down to the water? Ben explained that they tumble down from branch to branch and don't seem to get hurt. It was high tide when it happened, so they landed in the water. Once down, they never return to the nest.

I then did some research. According to statistics on coastal Canada geese, 64 percent nest on the ground, 13 percent in osprey or eagle nests, 11 percent on muskrat or beaver lodges, 9 percent on artificial nest tubs, and 3 percent on bridges or pilings. The maximum height for a goose in a tree nest was 100 feet. So, it wasn't all that unusual to find a goose in an eagle's nest.