

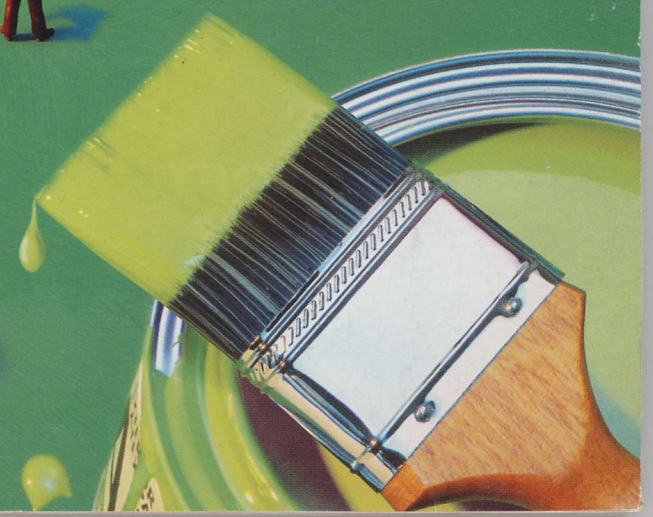
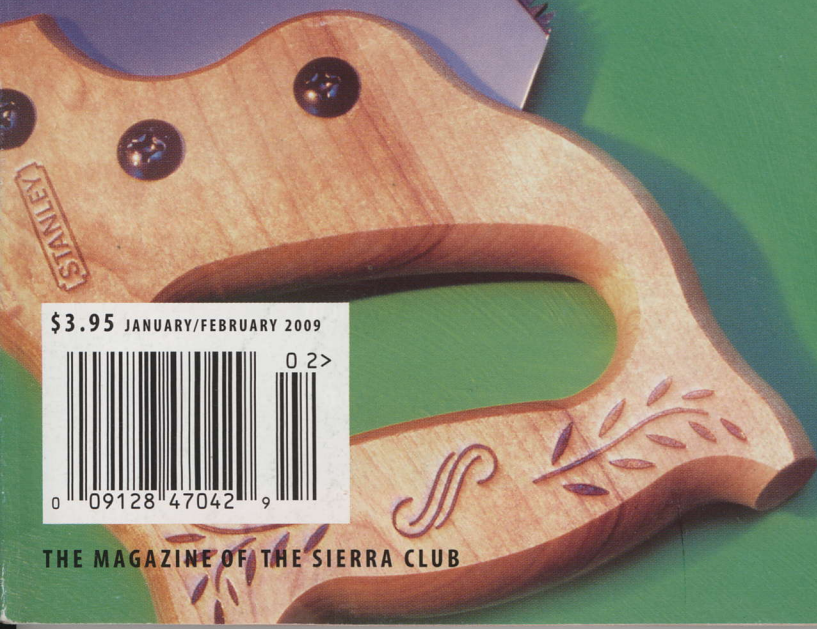
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THE MAGAZINE OF THE SIERRA CLUB



Adept scavengers, bald eagles can also plummet at 200 miles per hour to seize their prey with sharp talons and Velcro-like spiny scales.

I'm drifting in the clear shallows of the Squamish River, eyes gaping and ears pricked for

signs of avian life. Just 40 miles north of bustling Vancouver, British Columbia, sits one of the top viewing spots for wintering bald eagles. Six of us and a guide float through morning silence in a yellow inflatable, paddles still, our caps and woolens fending off a frigid January drizzle. Clouds shroud the glacial heads of Mts. Garibaldi and Mamquam and the Tantalus Range. Mist tucks into spruce and hemlock. Someone told me you can see 60 eagles in a tree here, but I'm beginning to suspect that's as credible as the tale of the 100-pound trout.

Most years, between late November and early February, 3,000 to 4,000 bald eagles from across western North America converge to roost where the Mamquam and Cheakamus Rivers join the Squamish. Like ravenous diners at an all-you-can-eat buffet, they gorge on dying chum salmon that have forged their way up from Howe Sound to spawn. The opportunistic raptors share a 1,865-acre smorgasbord, Brackendale Eagles Provincial Park, with some 150 bird species. Fifteen years ago,

Brackendale heralded a world record: 3,769 bald eagles counted in a single day.

We creep up on an overhanging red alder branch. About six feet from our heads rests a juvenile bald eagle, its broad wings cocked motionless to dry. As we glide directly below, it hardly acknowledges our presence. I spy half a dozen dark shapes in a neighboring alder. Then more. And more. We're surrounded by dozens of mottled brown youngsters as well as elders that sport the white heads and tails of maturity. Soundless and still, they regard us with eyes four to seven times stronger than ours. Several pick at salmon they've hauled up to a branch. Others, shadowed by squabbling gulls, demolish the fleshy fish on gravelly shores flanked by alders, maples, firs, and cottonwoods.

A trumpeter swan whooshes past. A great blue heron departs in a blurred whir. After spotting 50 eagles, I stop counting. Cameras and eyeballs sated, we coast gratefully homeward. —*Heather Conn*

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