

Eagles soar along the 'Migration Highway'



Pam Asheton
Listening to
the Land

A golden eagle soars for hours, a curious 'wing-tuck' glide overtop sun-warmed mountain ridgelines. When the just-out-on-and-about ground squirrels forget they're up there, eagles come in like stealth bombers, picking up fuel. This year's eagle 'Migration Highway' is open for business, has been since February until mid-May, when the very last immature youngsters swing through.

Science studies confirm this route's been in operation over 11,000 years. Eagle whiz Peter Sherrington (Rocky Mountain Research Foundation/ www.eagle-watch.ca) remembers one

spring count where, unbelievably, he counted 749 swinging through on one day (Mar. 25, 1993). Imagine going home after that, your brain cells endlessly re-running one memory after another! Incredibly, prior to 1992 the 'highway' or even any eagles migrating hadn't even been noticed by humans.

Numbers, Peter remarks, are steadily decreasing, have been since 2006 (buildings, development, wind turbines, perhaps climate change beginning even then). The total spring count used to average 4,000 birds but these days it's more around 2,000—although fall counts are higher. Copperplate handwritten notes dating back to the 1600s by Hudson Bay fur traders and surveyors noticed, even back then, eagle populations fluctuated too with an almost-set-in-stone 11-year



Wildlife photographer Duane Starr (www.duanestarrphotography.com) aimed his camera straight overhead for this golden eagle's magnificent wingspan detailing out Grand Valley way.

varying abundance cycle of snowshoe hares (breakfast, lunch and dinner) that along with marmots are their primary breeding

grounds munch.

These eagles swing and soar (their wings in a 'tuck' position hitting sun-warmed thermals along

a very specific ridgeline route) from as far south as Mexico to northern breeding grounds. Now they're accessing ancient DNA

encoded memory, some heading towards Alaska and others more to the Yukon and Northwest Territories.

They're sleekly aerodynamic, streamlined, more Ferrari than Ford. A bald eagle's wingspan is chunkier, kind of 'squarer' out from the core body to the very tips of those eight foot pinion feathers (compared to the golden's elegant 6'6" wingspan).

They mate for life, and their nests can edge that way too, built and added to over decades; impressive ugly structures of sticks, sticks and more sticks with minimal padding actually in the nest (one Florida super-nest weighed over three tons, and measured at 5 1/2' wide x 3' deep - you need one strong living tree for start-up housing). The reason they're so named is because of their glorious nape feathers (the hackles), which are a beautiful almost metallic gold.

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