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Peter Sherrington: Linking People to Raptors and Natural World

By Leslie Beaton Hedley

Imagine standing on a mountainside buffeted by 100-km-per-hour winds. Now imagine doing that for 11 hours straight in rain, sleet, snow or hail, with weather ranging 30 degrees on either side of zero. Daunting? Not if you're Peter Sherrington. It's just a typical day at the "office" for Sherrington, who will receive an Alberta Wilderness Defender Award this year.

On a fateful day in 1993, a passion for the majestic raptors sunk its talons into the Cochrane man. A decade and a half later, the magnificent obsession shows no sign of relinquishing its hold. Even after a full day of observation, followed by time at the computer to update a daily log (see www.eaglewatch.net), enthusiasm warms Sherrington's voice as he discusses the eagles and their significance – not only to the ecosystem, but to humankind.

"They are important portals to the natural world," he says, noting that the birds are predators at the top of their food chain and "as the eagles go, so will we." The sight of the majestic, "totemic" raptors also reawakens our primal ties to the natural world, he says. Seeing them "reminds us our veneer of domestication has not completely taken over."

Before Sherrington's interest in golden eagles hatched a second career, he worked in the oil and gas industry for 30 years. At the time of the Gulf War, he decided to leave that field "for various reasons." He'd taken a year off and was helping friend Des Allen, a steward of the Mount Lorette area in Kananaskis, with research at Hay Meadow. "Des was focusing mostly on plants and I was helping him out" by recording observations about the avian population of the area.

On March 22, 1993, at about 11:30 a.m., Sherrington spotted a lone golden eagle rising on a thermal current. It was joined by a second eagle, and the researchers assumed the birds were a resident pair. But when a third eagle joined the circling pair and the expected fighting didn't begin, Sherrington's curiosity was piqued.

As more birds became visible, it was apparent much more was going on in the area than researchers had dreamed. Sherrington and Allen began keeping count. By the end of the day, they'd spotted 103 golden eagles. The next afternoon, they noted 250. Sherrington had made an incredible find: the migration route of golden eagles, traveling from their winter habitat in the U.S. and northern Mexico to their breeding grounds in Alaska and Yukon. Until then, it was believed the majority of golden eagles didn't migrate.

Sherrington's discovery opened a door to a new understanding of the birds' breeding and migration habits, and utterly changed our understanding of the magnificent birds. As well, his careful chronicling of the golden eagles' dwindling numbers has lent further weight to concerns about climate change as it affects North American wildlife. Global warming may be leading to drought conditions in the birds' winter areas, which would limit their food supply.

"Changing agricultural practices may also be a factor," says Sherrington, noting that the reason for the population decrease of about one-third is probably a complex of many factors, including human encroachment on wild areas and the birds' value to European collectors, who may pay US\$65,000 for a single specimen. "We're not sure how big the trade in these birds is," he says, noting that eagle feathers are also prized by First Nations for spiritual ceremonies and are "very hard to come by legitimately."





Since that pivotal moment at Hay Meadow, Sherrington, now Research Director of Rocky Mountain Eagle Research Foundation, has dedicated himself to observing the eagles as they ride thermal winds along the mountains that run like a spine down western North America. He estimates that 19,700 golden eagles have been spotted by himself, Des Allen, and a host of volunteers at Mount Lorette and Bellevue in the Crowsnest Pass.

“The value of the [program’s] volunteer work for the last year is \$103,000,” notes Sherrington, estimating about 1,500 people per year. Although such input is always important, this year saw a particularly generous donation of time and labour as volunteers stepped in to act as observers while Sherrington attended his wife, Barbara, through a difficult illness.

The public’s curiosity about golden eagle migration has enabled Sherrington to bring the environment to the notice of “hundreds of thousands of people through dozens of newspaper articles and radio interviews.” Similarly, during the Canmore Festival of Eagles, 1,500 to 2,000 people annually learn more about the great birds. This festival takes place the weekend after Thanksgiving and is entering its twelfth year.

Sherrington, a past president of AWA, has been a member for 30 years and served on the board for 10 years. He has given an estimated 250 presentations on golden eagles, at the festival and elsewhere. These, he says, “help the public take the next step. It brings in people who would not otherwise become involved in the environmental movement. ... In the past, we have spent far too much time in meetings. It’s much more important to get out and interface with people, so they know how to see the landscape – to read the landscape, rather than just use it as a playground.”

If he had his way, the public would be better educated in environmental issues from childhood. He believes that environmental literacy should be the fourth R. “I don’t know how you get an R out of that, but it should be reading, writing, arithmetic and environmental literacy.” Such steps are needed, he says, because “the majority of people don’t go into the wild at all.” “It’s a question of values,” he adds. “If you don’t understand it, you don’t protect it.” He is adamant regarding the solution: public education. “We have to re-teach them.”

Although his tireless efforts on behalf of the eagles has allowed Sherrington less time with his grandchildren than he would have liked, he has worked to ensure a legacy of stewardship that he hopes will benefit generations to come. “As long as these birds have a future,” he says, “so do we.”

