

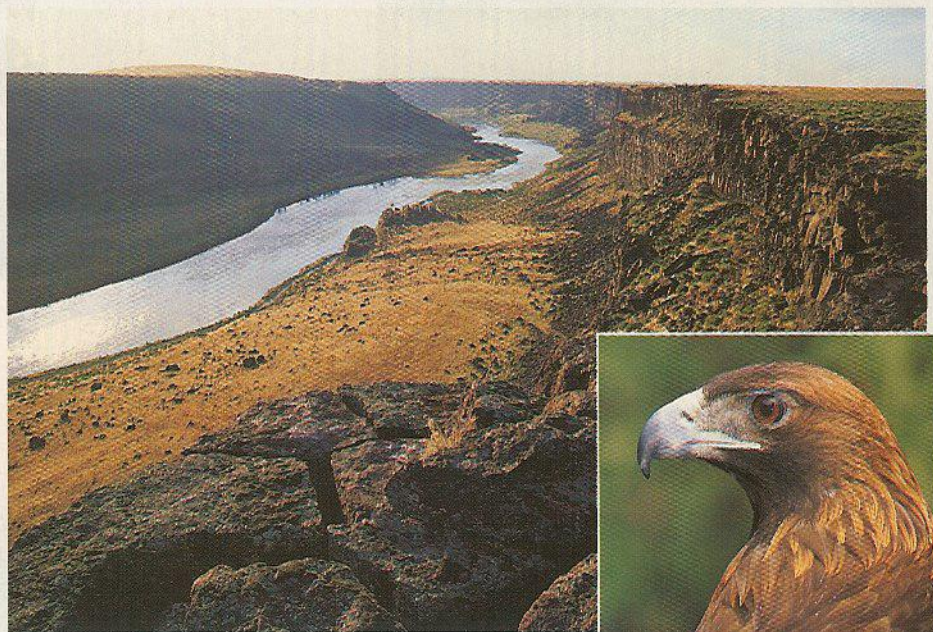
Sagebrush and Time

Wide-eyed in the Idaho desert.

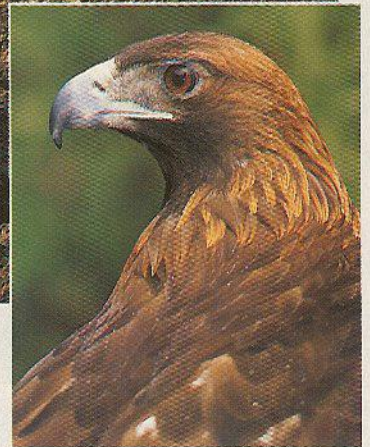
I am here attempting reconciliation, the wayward son come home. I walk through a knee-high forest of what I once dismissed as "sagebrush" and as penance whisper the names of the plants that dwell here: winterfat, rabbitbrush, horsebrush, snakeweed, needle grass, Indian rice grass, big sage. When I was a child, Idaho's high desert looked all blue-gray and hopeless. But 20 years after leaving, I felt an increasing tug to return—a sense that I'd passed judgment on this land too quickly.

A thin amber line marks the spot where the sun will rise above the horizon. To the south, the Owyhee Mountains catch first light, and then comes the day's first hawk. I pull binoculars to my eyes as a Swainson's soars high in the sky, wings held in a shallow "V." Moments later a northern harrier glides by, inches above the ground, its white patch conspicuous at the base of its dark tail.

The sageland that borders the Snake River Canyon 40 miles south of Boise holds the densest population of nesting raptors in North America, perhaps the world. More than 800 pairs of falcons, eagles, hawks, and owls gather here each spring to mate and raise their young. Yet a view persists of desert as dead and raptors as "varmint" that compete with and kill livestock and game. "Chicken hawks" are still shot in Idaho, but two decades of work has won protection for this stretch of land. The Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area, established in 1993, runs along 80 miles of the Snake and spans 485,000 acres. (Even so, compromises were made: a third of the NCA is occupied by



Raptors soar, shells rumble in the Snake River Birds of Prey National Conservation Area. Inset: a golden eagle



an Idaho National Guard tank-training range; as I walk I hear the deep rumble of exploding shells.) Golden eagles, prairie falcons, red-tailed hawks, ferruginous hawks, Swainson's hawks, northern harriers, American kestrels, turkey vultures, and seven species of owl nest here. Nine other raptor species migrate through.

The orange flame of a desert paintbrush catches my eye, and just beyond I see a golden eagle perched on a small lump of basalt. It slowly turns its head toward me, then rises into the air, as if through levitation, unfurls its immense

BY GUY HAND



"EAGLES MAY SEEM TO SLEEP WING-WIDE UPON THE AIR," OBSERVED THE POET JOHN KEATS. WITH WING FEATHERS THAT SERVE AS SEPARATE AIRFOILS, EAGLES ARE SINGULARLY DEFT GLIDERS.



In 50 Years

when youngsters first set eyes on the Grand Canyon, they'll have you to thank.



They could be your grandchildren, or the grandkids of someone you know. And they'll continue to witness the unspoiled beauty of our natural environment thanks to your planned gift to the Sierra Club. We can assist you in planning a bequest or other deferred gift from your will or living trust; your pension, IRA or retirement fund; or even your life insurance policy. To learn more, please contact us. And make sure that our natural wonders are just as grand in fifty years. Call John Calaway, Director of Planned Giving, at (415) 977-5639. Or write: Sierra Club, 85 Second Street, 2nd Floor, San Francisco, CA 94105-3441.

wings, and disappears. A few more steps and I'm standing on the edge of the Snake River Canyon—a perfect nursery for raptors. Black basalt cliffs drop 700 feet to the narrow canyon floor; ledges, cracks, and crevices along the cliff walls provide shelter for birds to nest and raise their young. Some eagle aeries—thick fortresses of interwoven branches and twigs—weigh 2,000 pounds and measure seven feet across. A few days earlier I spotted a pair of downy-white chicks peering from one of those immense woody sanctuaries.

Adult raptors launch from the cliffside, rising on warm air currents, to the sage plateau above. The soil there is deep and light—loess dropped by desert winds over the past 10,000 years—and in it grow the plants that support the large populations of jackrabbits and Townsend ground squirrels on which the birds survive.

The sun is up now, and air rising from the canyon is suddenly thick with the scent of sage. A pair of red-tailed hawks glide toward me from below, motionless yet moving quickly. When they reach the rim, they begin circling. They drift through the air at eye level, only a wing beat away, too close to track with binoculars. I can see the splash of yellow at the base of their hooked beaks, the delicate black and gold lines bordering the tips of their tails, the arc and quiver of their primary feathers. If I had the inclination I could catalog the smallest of anatomical details, but instead I am transfixed by their dark, penetrating eyes.

How could I have once found this land so unremarkable, this web of life so indistinct? Like many westerners, I passed it off as sacrificial ground, better suited to bombing ranges and waste dumps than anything close to understanding. I was wrong. The realization that land poorly seen is land easily destroyed is the force that has pushed me into this desert homecoming—and, after two decades of blindness, opened my eyes. ■

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