

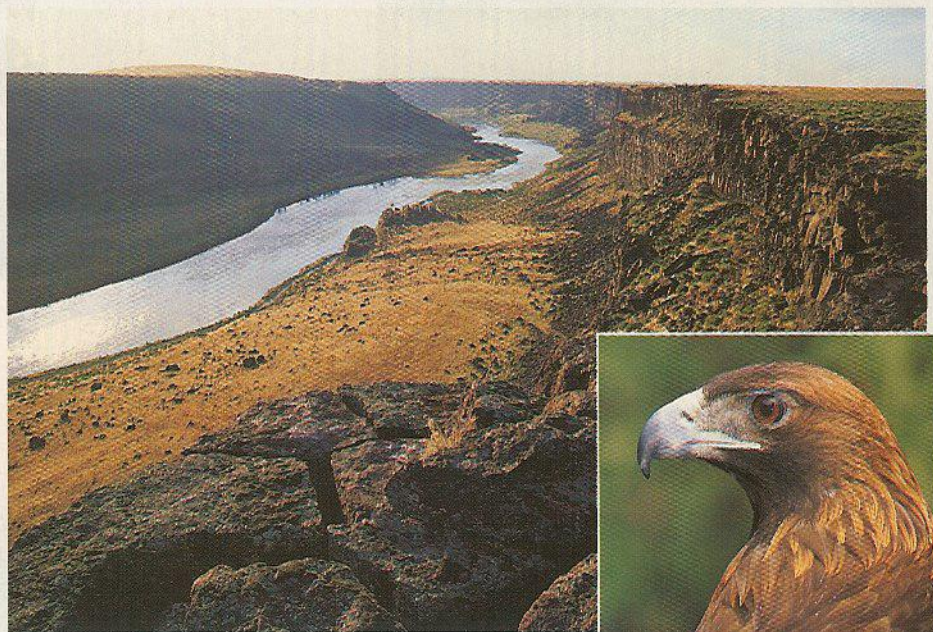
# Sagebrush and Time

Wide-eyed in the Idaho desert.

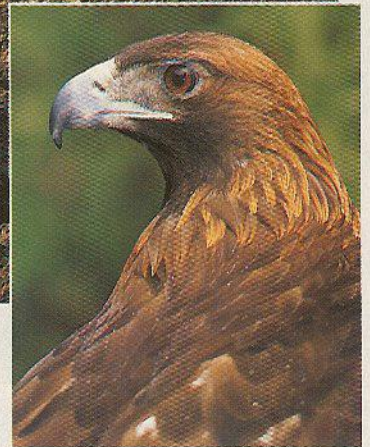
I am here attempting reconciliation, the wayward son come home. I walk through a knee-high forest of what I once dismissed as "sagebrush" and as penance whisper the names of the plants that dwell here: winterfat, rabbitbrush, horsebrush, snakeweed, needle grass, Indian rice grass, big sage. When I was 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.

