

A photograph of a bald eagle and its chick on a nest in a tree. The eagle is perched on a nest made of sticks and pine needles, looking to the right. A small, fluffy chick is visible behind it. The nest is situated in a large, mossy tree trunk. The background shows a clear blue sky and some green foliage.

Of Eagles & Loons

One Photographer's Summer

by John Hyde

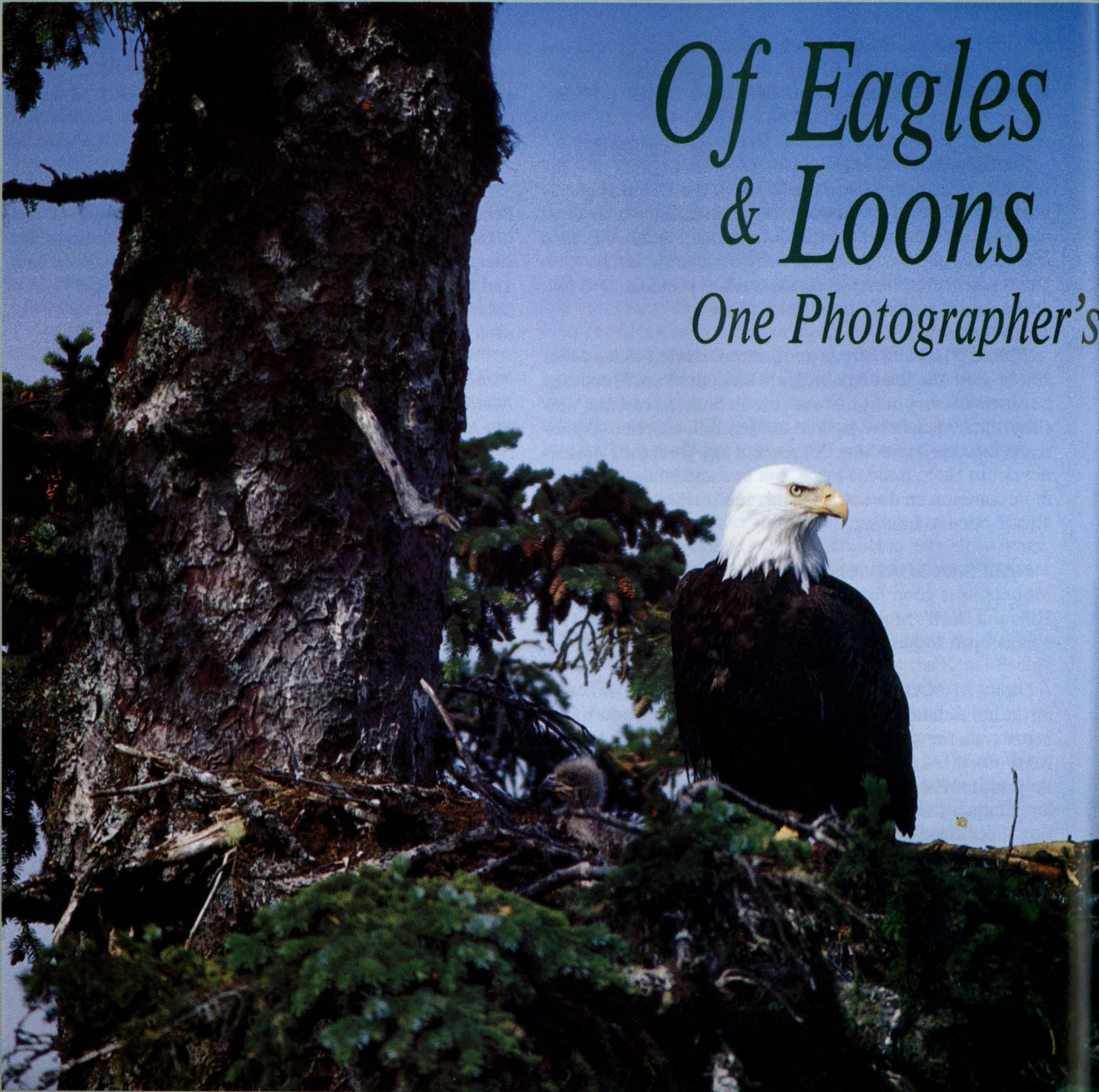
Perched strategically in an old hemlock with views both up and down Lynn Canal near Juneau is an eagle's nest. A small canopy of branches above shields it from both rain and sun. A branch worn smooth by eagles' talons reaches out from one side like a beckoning finger, providing a perch for landing, preening, and watching for prey.

During the latter part of March two adult bald eagles

(*Haliaeetus leucocephalus*) chose this hemlock as the most favorable spot to build their nest. Two large groves of dead timber nearby provided much of the "lumber" for their new house. Dead branches, moss, and grasses were gathered and meticulously assembled and tramped into place. In the last week of April the female laid two white eggs in a small moss-lined depression within the nest. With resolute care she attended to

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their incubation, only occasionally relinquishing this responsibility to her mate. For the most part he was involved in hunting prey and in gathering additional materials for their nest. Sometimes the temptation to ride the wind and play in the thermals proved too much and the two would trade places so she could leave to stretch her wings.

Thirty-five days later, barely perceptible peeps emanated from beneath the female's breast and within a few more days tiny fluffs of grey down appeared. Whenever a pair of hungry little beaks poked skywards, she would feed them small shreds of fish kept in one corner of the nest. Herring



Summer

by John Hyde



As a professional outdoors photographer whose work has been showcased in these pages for the last five years, John Hyde takes us behind the scenes to share some experiences of dedicated observation.

Top to bottom: Adult calling to mate. Adult lands with herring. Herring is fed to eaglets.

WILDLIFE VIEWING

EAGLES & LOONS

and Dolly Varden provided most of the fare which was delivered about six times daily. The female would feed herself only after the eaglets had their fill. As they grew, so did their appetites.

Once, after she had been on the nest for more than six hours, she began to call incessantly for her mate's return. Twenty minutes later, she gave up and after an hour resumed her attempt. Within five minutes the male returned with a third adult, and the two of them flew around the nest twice before landing on the perch. One bird (presumably the third adult) jumped down into the nest and after a bit of vocalizing, the pair flew off. Within an hour, both returned simultaneously, and the third adult, relieved of its "duties," flew into an adjacent tree. The two parents inspected their clutch and after a little "housekeeping," the female settled down to tending the young. The adult in the adjacent tree left, and within a few moments the male dove from his perch also. I never observed this behavior again.

On particularly cool and rainy days the adults would pluck a beakful of moss from the nest, raise it chest high and shake it vigorously. After all the "dust" settled from it, they would gently pack this around the eaglets and only then would they settle down over them.

After about four weeks, the young eaglets began to lose their downy appearance as the tips of true feathers began to protrude. Though eating and sleeping still occupied most of their time, preening began to take up greater portions of the day.

By the middle of July, the eaglets were almost fully feathered and were approaching the adults in size. Now both adults could leave the nest to hunt and fly together. Not only were the eaglets able to feed and defend themselves but room in the nest was simply running out. At this stage, their parents merely brought food by once in a while and occasionally roosted in trees nearby.

As the eaglets developed physically, they moved further and further from the nest. Gradually, they started perching on limbs adjoining the nest to preen, stretch, and flap their wings.

On a rainy July 25, I watched both of them exercising and preening and remember thinking that they looked as if they would soon fledge. Two days later, I returned and the nest was empty. I soon located both in trees nearby, as they were calling back and forth to each other and to their parents in adjacent trees. They seemed both ebullient and terrified. One refused to budge from its safe foothold while the other would occasionally venture out into the open air, while doing its best to look regal.

Over the next few weeks, I would return to the area every few days and would usually find one or more of the family present. After discovering them all together at the mouth of a tiny

stream, I bid them farewell.

In addition to the eagles, I also had the pleasure of observing a family of red-throated loons. In May the adult birds selected a small shallow pond near Mendenhall Lake as a secure place to rest and rear their young. Loons mate for life and having successfully raised one chick here last year, this pair had returned to try again. The female acted as guardian for the chick and the male hunted. Almost all the fish they ate were caught on other ponds nearby. The male returned with salmon smolts, young Dolly Varden, and herring. Many previous observations had demonstrated to me that the male would return to fulfill his obligation to the chick between 4:00 p.m. and 4:30 p.m. One day, having been delayed in getting to the blind, I feared I had missed the afternoon feed.

Within seconds I focused my 800mm lens on the chick and as it turned in profile, I could easily make out a huge tail protruding from its open mouth. With frantic gulping motions, it quickly swallowed the last of the fish. I wondered if loons had the same abilities as snakes to unhinge their jaws in order to swallow large prey. Not once did I see the male ever offer food to the female, nor did I ever see her actually consume a fish. To my knowledge she never caught any in the pond and initially she never left the pond during daylight to forage for fish. Then, one day as I approached the pond, I noticed an area littered with shiny new .22 caliber brass shells. At first I could not locate any of the loons but finally spotted them nestled back into some reeds along the far shore. Usually they would come to accept my presence in the blind within 10 or 20 minutes, but this time it took over an hour. At about 4:00 p.m., at the time for the afternoon feed, both the chick and mother became quite active. An hour later, the female began alternately swimming the length of the pond and watching the sky for her mate's arrival. At 6:00 p.m. she swam the shoreline checking for predators and then flew off, calling to her mate. I could hear her repeat her calls as she approached each pond in the area. About 90 minutes later, she returned with a fish and fed the chick.

Never again did I see the male of this pair. The female now became more aggressive towards other birds that chose to share her pond. A pair of young mallards settled down one morning on the far side of the pond. As I turned back to the loons, all that remained of the female was a spot of rings on the water. Before I could turn back to the mallards, I heard them explode off the water. In their place floated the loon which had made a "submarine" attack of over one hundred feet in only a few

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seconds.

As I continued to watch the loons, my respect for the birds grew. The female's absence while hunting jeopardized not only her chick but herself as well. The chick could not fly and its only defense was to dive. In addition, it would be at least ten days until it fledged and the waterfowl season opened in five days.

Away on assignment, I could not return until the day after the season opened. When I arrived, the lake was empty.

John Hyde serves as Visual Information Specialist for ADF&G, Juneau. For a number of years he has been photographically chronicling the life history of eagles in the Juneau area.

Alaska Bird Listings Grow

by Pete Isleib

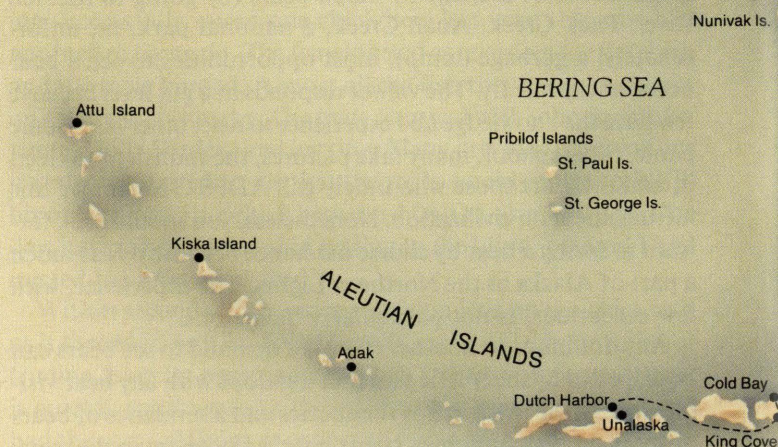
Two new birds to Alaska and North America have recently been sighted. A male Yellow-breasted Bunting (*Emberia aureola*) was found foraging in the short grasses along the airfield runway on the western-most of the Aleutian Islands, Attu, in May. Birders who trek to Attu each spring have long awaited and expected this species to occur in the Aleutian Islands. The Yellow-breasted Bunting is a common summer resident of grasslands on Hokkaido Island, Japan, and the Soviet Far East north to the Kamchatka Peninsula.

On September 2, four employees of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service sighted a Great Tit (*Parus major*) near abandoned buildings on Little Diomed Island in Bering Strait. This bird, a large chickadee found throughout Eurasia, was approximately 1,000 to 1,500 miles out of range.

Since Gabrielson and Lincoln's 1959 monumental publication, *Birds of Alaska*, nearly 120 species have been added to Alaska listings. Approximately a third of these species were Eurasian birds, many found to occur with some annual regularity in the Aleutian/Bering Sea region of western Alaska.

Currently, 430 species of birds have been recorded in Alaska, almost one-half the number (about 860 species) recorded in all of North America north of Mexico.

Pete Isleib, a member of the Board of Directors of the American Birding Association, has published numerous scientific papers on the status, distribution, and abundance of birds in Alaska.



For further reading, choose from the following:

Calef, G.W. 1981. *Caribou and the Barren Lands*. Firefly Books Ltd.

Miller, F. L. 1982. "Caribou," *Wild Mammals of North America*, J.A. Chapman and G.A. Feldhammer, eds. The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Geist, V. 1971. *Mountain Sheep*. Univ. of Chicago Press.

Nichols, L. 1978. "Dall's Sheep," *Big Game of North America*, J.L. Schmidt and D.L. Gilbert, eds. Stackpole.

Alaska Vacation Planner, annual booklet free on request from the Alaska Division of Tourism, P.O. Box E, Juneau, AK 99811.

The Milepost, annual softcover book featuring Alaska travel information (Alaska Northwest Publishing, 130 2nd Ave., South, Edmonds, WA 98020).

The Alaska Wilderness Milepost, annual softcover book concentrating on remote communities and lodges (same as above).