

## CANADA



# It's the Airbnb for majestic bald eagles

SUZANNE MORPHET cruises the Harrison River to catch a glimpse of the revered raptors

About 10km down the Harrison River in southern British Columbia, the river widens, our boat slows, and we start to spot them. Bald eagles — the revered raptors of the Pacific Northwest — have flown here by the thousands for the annual salmon spawn.

"This is the hotspot," says Molly Nootebos, our boat driver and guide with Harrison Eco Tours as we come to an area known as Bald Eagle Flats. It's where the

Chehalis River flows into the Harrison, carrying gravel from the Coast mountains and creating myriad channels and gravel bars where salmon deposit their eggs, then die.

"That's what we call the eagle Airbnb," Molly laughs, pointing to a single deciduous tree where more than a dozen bald eagles are sunning themselves in its bare branches. At the water's edge, dozens more eagles peck at the carcasses of dead fish and defend their catch from pesky seagulls.

This is the largest congregation of bald eagles in North America, with anywhere from 35,000 to 50,000 of these big birds of prey flying in from as far away as Alaska between October and February to feast on the Harrison's huge salmon runs.

The river is only 18km long, but it's an important tributary of British Columbia's mighty Fraser River. "It's actually a salmon stronghold," says Molly as she idles the boat and we drift downriver with the current.

"That means that all five species of salmon during their spawning cycle will come here to spawn. So, we have a run every single year. It just varies on the species that are coming through."

Local bird biologist and bald eagle enthusiast David Hancock explains that when lakes and rivers further north in BC and Alaska begin to freeze, bald eagles can no longer fish, so they fly south looking for food. The Fraser is the first major river system they come to that has open water year-round, and the Harrison is a favourite part of it.

"In 4km of land, you'll get 10,000 to 15,000 eagles feeding at a time sometimes, depending on the day," says David. "That's a spectacle that I related to being on the African plains with wildebeest."

And it's not just the eagles that benefit from the plethora of dead salmon.

What's known as the bald eagle Airbnb on the bank of the Harrison River. The white head and tail feathers make mature bald eagles easy to spot, while juveniles blend in with the trees.



A juvenile bald eagle pecks at an easy meal of dead salmon. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

"It's the whole ecosystem, feeding the insects, feeding the rest of the waterfowl — the ducks, geese and swans . . . you get a million and a half fish dying, and each fish is averaging eight, nine, 10 pounds. There's a lot of fish there."

Salmon aren't the only prized fish in these waters. The largest freshwater fish in North America — the white sturgeon, which can grow to 3.5m long — is here too. When the salmon spawn and die, "that scent is drifting down river and it's luring the sturgeon into the system," Molly tells us. "The sturgeon will actually go into those spawning channels and use their tails to stir up the gravel so that the eggs come out."



Bird biologist David Hancock holds a live bald eagle that he's caught in order to put a tracker on it.

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The water is so clean and clear that we can easily see the river's gravel bottom, but on the day of my tour we don't see any sturgeon or even many salmon. There's been a lot of rain recently and the water is high, washing salmon off gravel bars and down river. Instead, we focus on the eagles.

On the opposite riverbank we spot numerous white heads of mature eagles poking out of the green foliage of a conifer forest. Many more juvenile eagles are resting here too, but with all brown feathers, they're harder to see.

With bald eagles everywhere we look, it's hard to believe these birds were once persecuted. But when Hancock got his private pilot's licence in the early 1950s and started looking for eagle nests, he could find only three breeding pairs in the entire Fraser Valley.

One day he went across the border to Blaine, Washington, and to his horror, discovered that American fishermen were shooting them for a bounty. "There, on the decks of every fish boat was a little white bucket. And in that bucket were the legs of eagles."

The birds were thought to be eating too many salmon and threatening the livelihoods of human fishers. For every pair of legs, fishermen were paid \$2, says David. "It was that discovery at age 15 that got me into conservation."

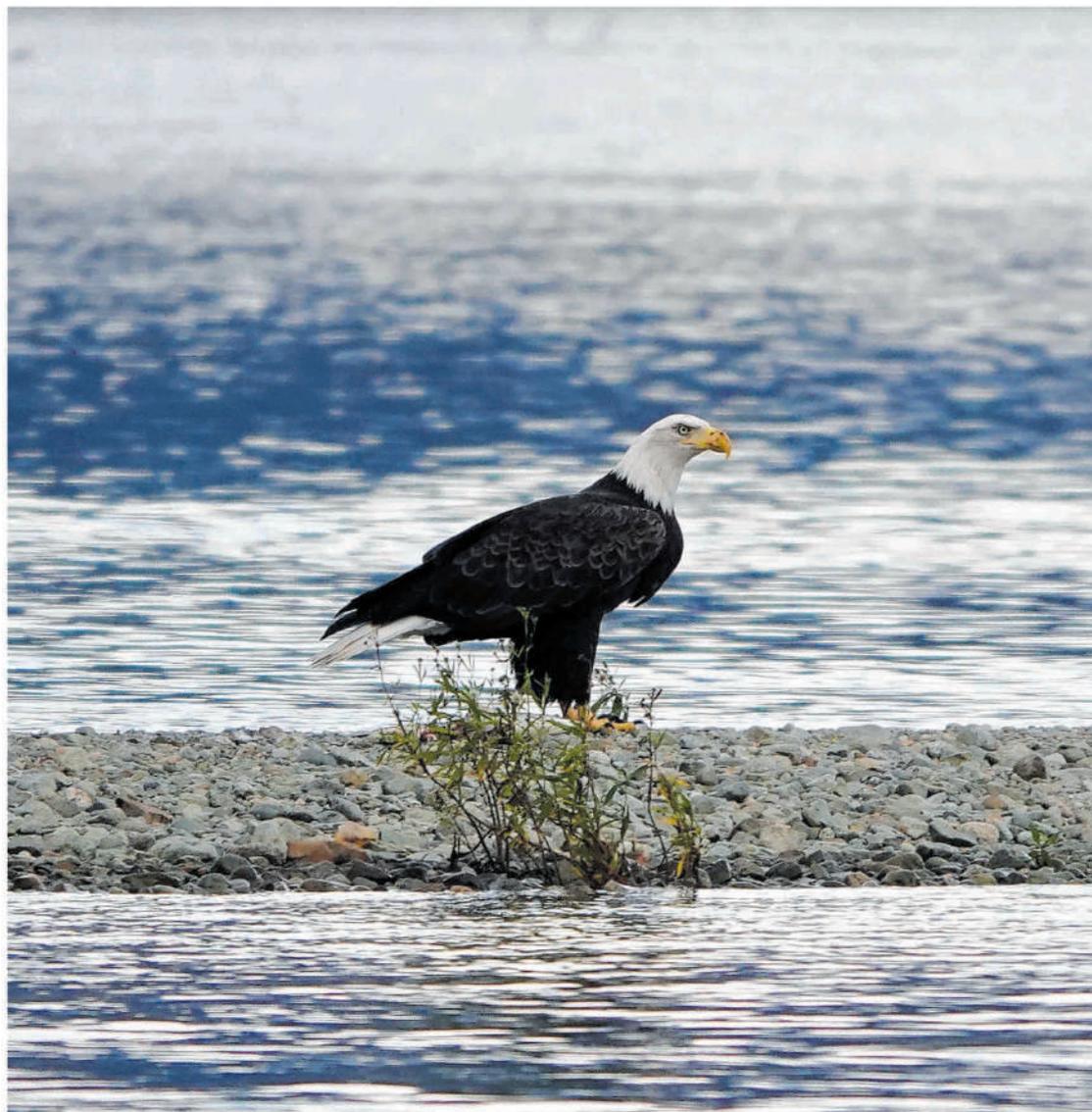
Today, the valley is home to about 700 pairs of bald eagles and when they're joined by the thousands flying in from further north every October, it makes for an eagle extravaganza.

For 25 years, right up until COVID, the Fraser Valley Bald Eagle Festival was held annually in the village of Harrison Mills. More recently, Tourism Harrison rebranded the months from October through January as Season of the Wild to celebrate all the valley's iconic creatures.

When we're motoring back to the Village of Harrison Hot Springs, Molly tells me that her most amazing wildlife encounter on this river had nothing to do with eagles, salmon or sturgeon.

"A cougar was chasing a deer," she says. "They were swimming across the river." "What happened?" I asked, incredulous. "I had a family (on board) and I didn't want the little kids to see, so we didn't stick around to find out ... but it looked bad for the deer."

**Suzanne Morphet was a guest of Tourism Harrison and Harrison Eco Tours. They have not influenced this story, or read it before publication.**



Above, a bald eagle on a gravel bar in the Harrison River waits for his next meal of washed-up salmon. The eagles are powerful fliers and every year many travel from Alaska to southern British Columbia in search of salmon. Left, guests with Harrison Eco Tours watch for bald eagles on the Harrison River.

## fact file

## IF YOU GO

■ Harrison Eco Tours offers bald eagle viewing boat tours on the Harrison River three times a day from mid-October to mid-February. Cost is \$149 (\$CA129) per adult, with discounts for seniors and children [harrisonecotours.com](http://harrisonecotours.com)

## GETTING THERE

■ The village of Harrison Hot Springs is about a two-hour drive east of Vancouver. You can drive a loop by taking the Trans-Canada Highway 1 one way and returning on Highway 7 through Harrison Mills the other way. It's close enough for a day trip, but there's good local accommodation and it's easy to spend a couple nights here.

## MORE INFO

■ Information about events during Season of the Wild at [tourismharrison.com](http://tourismharrison.com)  
 ■ To learn more about bald eagles in BC and where to view them on live cameras, [hancockwildlife.org](http://hancockwildlife.org)



Bald eagles have a 2.5m wingspan. Right, feasting on salmon along the Harrison River. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet