

# Eagle's Trial

by Gillian Richardson

## EAGLE'S TALONS GRIPPED

the only remaining branch jutting sideways from a lightning-blackened spruce snag. Below him, the lake heaved and rolled. Plumes of spray drenched the rocky shoreline as waves slammed against it. There would be no fishing until the stormy weather passed. Shoulders hunched, Eagle rocked in the gusty wind that snatched dribbles of cold rain from the tips of his feathers and his beak.

It was his fourth day without food. Eagle's hunger made him restless. For several weeks he'd been well fed, gorging on easily caught spawning salmon. Now little remained of that rich feast but fish skeletons discarded on pebbly beaches. Around the lake, a few eagles hunted on calmer days. Most were mature adults. In Eagle's third season, his skills still didn't match theirs. His dives often left him with empty talons and an equally unfilled belly. As the hours of chilling rain continued, he had gone to roost early, feeling less and less inclined to spend his remaining energy in fruitless flight. Clouds swallowed the mountain tops. Darkness settled over the lake.

Weak sunlight broke through the cloud layer next morning. A few late migrating gulls gossiped as they cruised along the shore. Eagle shook the last drops of water from his dark cloak. He stretched each long wing to

ease the stiffness and groomed a few outer feathers back into place. The rain and wind had no chance of penetrating the soft layer of down next to his skin. He let his eyes rove across the scene below him, choosing his flight path. With a quick lurch forward, he launched himself into the sky and flapped over the water.

The immediate task was to find breakfast. He scanned the surface of the lake for telltale movement. With legendary eagle eyes, he would be able to pick out a fish swimming near the surface even though its darker back might make it invisible to other winged hunters. Dead fish floating with their lighter bellies up would be an even easier target. Today, his first pass over the lake revealed nothing of interest. He rose higher, catching a thermal off the side of the hill, and banked around for another trip from shore to shore. He trailed a small flight of gulls hurrying to join their fellows at a sandy strip of beach. Half a dozen of the white-and-gray birds squabbled over a rotting carcass of salmon that had been overlooked by other predators.

Eagle circled and glided down. The smaller birds scattered like leaves in the wind as he landed a few feet away and hopped across the pebbles to pick at the fish's remains. His reward amounted to only a few morsels. He

Illustrated by Jed Alexander

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A THERMAL IS A RISING  
CURRENT OF WARM AIR. WHEE!



lifted his head to the sky and screamed out his disappointment. He took to the air again and continued the hunt.

A shadow in the water caught his attention. Something bobbed just below the surface. It appeared lumpy, with a long narrow part trailing behind. The action of the current caused the thing to sway and bounce slightly, as if it were swimming. Eagle flared his tail feathers, braking his flight, and turned to circle above the object. If it was a dead fish—even if it equalled his own weight—he might lift it high enough to carry it to the beach. He rose up

and veered away slightly, preparing for a shallow dive. Wings tucked and talons stretched forward, he glided in to snatch the meal.

Eagle's feet were superb tools for grasping and holding. Once his talons penetrated the flesh of his prey, small spikes called spicules would secure the grip. A live fish or bird would be unable to wriggle free once the vise had locked tight. Dead prey wouldn't offer that kind of resistance, but the spicules would hold it securely for air transport. When Eagle's claws hit the floating object, they sank through a sodden mass of feathers into plump flesh.

POOREAGLE.  
HESSOHUNGRY!



• IWISHWEHADSAVED  
HIMSOMECOOKIES.

He stretched his wings and pumped to propel himself forward and up.

Instead of rising into the sky, Eagle felt a great weight pull against him. He was brought to a full stop. He flapped in a determined way, his huge wings beating the air as the tips of his primary feathers slapped the water. His talons were anchored fast. At last he settled onto the bobbing carcass of a Canada goose. It had been wounded by shotgun pellets, falling to its death too far out on the lake for a retriever to fetch.

Eagle sat on this unsteady feathered raft in water up to his belly, balancing with his wings outstretched. He rested a few minutes before once more trying to get airborne with his cargo. Again, he was unable to raise the goose from the water. Even its dry weight—slightly more than his own ten pounds—would have taxed his lifting power. After several days without food, Eagle was weaker than usual. Four attempts to fly off with his meal failed. But his hunger drove him to cling relentlessly to the dead bird. He began to tear at the feathers with his sharp, hooked beak.

The movement caused water to slosh around him, and pushed the goose deeper. Eagle held his wings extended, but they were soon lying on the water. Combined with the weight of waterlogged goose feathers, his body became less buoyant, and he felt himself sinking. Eagle pushed hard with his legs, and stretched his neck to keep himself from going under. Like a bounce on a trampoline, that action only soaked his feathers and added to the total weight. In a few

minutes, he was panting from the effort, his beak open. His only choices were to release the goose, or go down with it.

Eagle's hunger drove his instincts. He was not about to let this meal go. But his head was now barely above the water. His lungs ached from his ragged breathing. He felt the cold water reach through the protective outer layer of his feathers and saturate the down beneath. Once it met his skin, it would not be long before he was too cold to function. Long minutes passed. He floated, drifted, occasionally summoning the strength to try lifting his wings. It was clear his time could soon run out.

A gull screamed overhead. It seemed to rouse Eagle. He saw it land on a massive fallen tree that lay with its top branches in the lake. Eagle tilted back his head and gave a weak, rattling cry as if to assure the gull he was not about to give up this day. He tried lifting his wings again, but now found they wouldn't clear the water. However, the dragging action of trying to sweep them back beside his body propelled both him and the goose forward in the water. Better still, it brought his head up far enough to allow him to snatch a breath. He pushed his wings forward again, and swept them back. It was like flight, but without lift. Instead, Eagle was rowing himself and his prey toward the shore, like an overburdened galleon with massive, feathered oars. He kept it up, taking short rests now and then. If he paused too long, the chilling water quickly robbed his muscles of their power.



When the carcass of the goose finally dragged on the sandy bottom near the downed tree, the eagle's wings drooped. He shivered, his matted feathers plastered against his body. At last, in the shallow water, he was able to release the death grip he'd kept on the goose. He stepped shakily to the tree and climbed clear of the water to let his feathers dry.

The sun's rays now slanted sharply across the lake. It had taken most of the afternoon for the drama to unfold. Eagle soaked up the last warmth of the day, ruffling his feathers and preening while he recovered his strength. Before sunset, he was able to drag his long-awaited feast to shore. 🦅

**AUTHOR'S NOTE** Bald eagles, a species of sea eagle, are related to vultures and are often attracted to "easy" prey such as dead fish or waterfowl. The actual sighting of a majestic bald eagle saving itself from a watery grave inspired this story. I was birding with a friend along a lakeshore in British Columbia when we saw something large and dark bobbing up and down some distance from the beach. "It's a bald eagle!" I declared, focusing my binoculars on the object. "And it's going to drown," said my friend. All we could do was watch in dismay... until we realized that the huge bird was using its wings to row itself and a goose carcass to shore.