

Why Eagles Winter in the Skagit Valley

By Jim McCool

Winter travelers on highway 20 through the Skagit Valley can see hundreds of bald eagles perched on trees near the Skagit River. The Skagit valley hosts one of the largest winter populations of eagles in the US. Why is this? Conditions in the Skagit valley fill the needs of the wintering eagles, attracting the large numbers of eagles normally seen there.

Winter Salmon Provide Food for Eagles

Winter Salmon Spawn and Die

The Skagit river system is home to 5 species of salmon. There are several winter runs of salmon that spawn in the middle reach of the Skagit River. Starting in September and November with the Chinook and Coho, then peaking in late December with the Chum, hundreds of thousands of salmon return to the Skagit to spawn. When the salmon are through spawning, they die. The dead salmon float down the river, carried by the current. Heavy rains cause fluctuations in the level of the river, depositing the dead salmon on the bars and banks of the river. The abundance of dead salmon is important to the wintering eagles.

Eagles Have Less Prey in Winter

The natural prey of the eagle is not as plentiful in winter, or as easily found as in summer. In the summer, young, unwary prey is plentiful and easy to catch. By winter, the surviving young have grown more wary and are more difficult to catch. Many small animals die in their first winter; others hibernate or spend more time in burrows, making prey less accessible to the eagles. The lack of prey threatens the survival of eagles, forcing them to find alternative sources of food.

Eagles Find Salvation in Salmon

Although eagles are birds of prey, they are not pure hunters; they are also opportunistic feeders, and unlike many predators they are quite content to dine on carrion. The dead salmon deposited on the river banks provide a readily available food supply that the eagles do not have to hunt for, allowing them to conserve the energy that is needed for survival through the winter. Thus, the spawned-out salmon are the perfect winter food source for the eagles.

Ideal Habitat for Winter

Skagit Wild and Scenic Status

The Skagit river system is designated “Wild and Scenic” by congress. This means that the river system is protected by federal law, and there will be no further development or privatization of the

river system. The effect of the Wild and Scenic status of the river is that the natural surroundings of the river are preserved. The middle and upper Skagit flows through Mt Baker National Forest, and most of the lower Skagit flows through rural areas and farmland. Forests extend to the banks of the river, and even in developed areas, a buffer area of trees line much of the river banks.

Skagit Provides Protection

In the winter, eagles consume energy just fighting the cold. They can not afford to waste energy in unsuccessful hunting, or unnecessary flight. To conserve energy, the eagles need places to roost that are near a ready food supply, yet safe from disturbances that cause them to unnecessarily expend energy in flight. The Wild and Scenic status of the Skagit ensures that the eagles have protected places to roost. In addition, the Washington Department of Fish and Game has enacted a policy preventing boating on the Skagit during the morning hours when the eagles are feeding, leaving them undisturbed.

Plentiful Food and Protected Habitat Attract Eagles

The Skagit provides ideal conditions for wintering eagles. Abundant, readily available food and safe, high roosts attract the hundreds of eagles normally seen wintering in the Skagit valley. Protection from human disturbance keeps them from being driven away. Clearly, these ideal wintering conditions are what attract hundreds of eagles to winter in the Skagit valley.