



TRY THIS

Float Through the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve

Explore raptors by raft

BY MICHELLE THEALL



Chilkat
Bald Eagle
Preserve

A raft floats by a resting eagle on the Tsirku River.

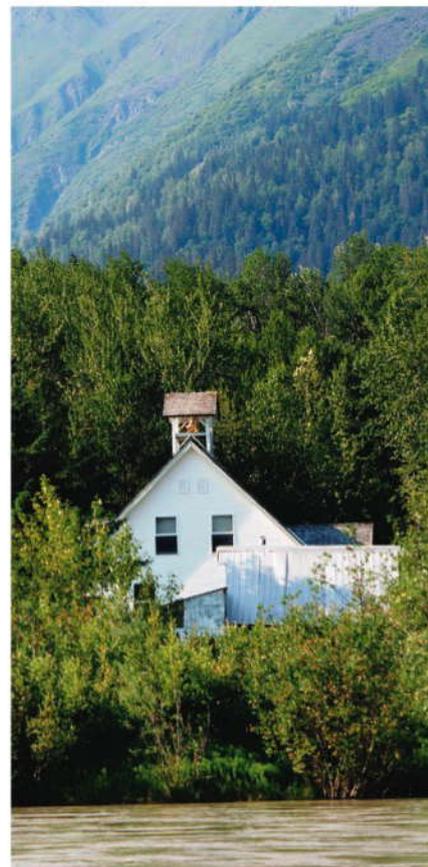
HAINES EMERGES INTO VIEW FROM the bow of our ferry like a charmed hamlet, and within minutes I spot a pair of bald eagles soaring above the dock, which is lined with benches and baskets of petunias to welcome visitors. Ports have a reputation for being tourist traps, and though a few ships stop in Haines, this quiet retreat lacks the over-saturated, overwhelming bevy of t-shirt and jewelry shops found at most of the places the cruise liners dock. You get the feeling that people live here year-round, love it and want to share it with you, without changing its character to exploit the abundance of seasonal travel dollars. The eagles seem to know this too. They're protected and safe, perhaps even

worshiped as they fight, mate, fledge, scavenge and swoop along the three rivers forming the borders of the preserve: the Chilkat, Kleheni and Tsirku. Five species of salmon live in those rivers, providing a rich food source for the raptors, especially in October when the late run of spawned-out salmon make their way toward their inevitable end.

Our guide, Scott Ramsey, sports a Brillo pad of a beard, a tattered visor, and a Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve t-shirt. On the bus transporting us to our input spot along the river, he handles the microphone like he's a stand-up comic, regaling us with stories about his life in Haines and trying to get



[LEFT] A gentle breeze ruffles the feathers of a watchful eagle. [RIGHT] The school's bell tower in Klukwan.



us as excited as he is about the adventure we're about to take—one that he's been leading since 1997. He talks about fish wheels and how tough it is to field sports teams at the high school when the graduating class has sometimes been in the single digits. Small town mountain life in Alaska differs greatly from places like Colorado, for example. When the local school bus once stopped for a moose in the middle of the road next to the only farm in Haines, instead of taking photos of the moose, the kids were in awe of the eight cows grazing in the pasture. They see moose and bears all the time, but cows...

At the input along the muddy banks of the Tsirku River, we don rubber boots and split into groups of eight, before swinging our legs into the 18-foot inflatable rafts. The guides do all the rowing and navigating; they ease the boats over low spots and under branches and give us fair warning each time. I'm not a water person. I once rafted Class IV waters in Costa Rica and gripped the boat so tightly with my hands and feet that I was rendered immobile the rest of the week. But this is a gentle float—nothing scary about it—appropriate for all levels of ability—a relaxing, sigh of a trip. We wore life vests, but scarcely needed them, as we could have easily waded through most sections of the river on our trip.

While the best time to see bald eagles

in the preserve is mid-October through December, when around 3,000 of them congregate to feast on the carcasses of salmon, hundreds live here year-round. Summer floats like this one allow access inside the preserve to within a few feet of the birds. We get close without disturbing them, and we also lose count. There are nesting pairs. Solo scavengers. Sentinels keeping watch. We witness a battle over a fish between a mature and two immature bald eagles; feathers fan out and beat the air accompanied by screeching. Scott spins the boat to give everyone a good view.

I use a 300mm lens, but I continue to forget to put the shutter speed high enough to account for the length of the lens and the swaying of the raft. And yet it doesn't matter. Beyond the eagles, the point of my trip, I'm surrounded by glacier terrain, lush green foothills with waterfalls and the towering serrated peaks of the Takhinsha and Takshanuk mountains and the Chilkat Range, descending 7,000 feet to the valley floor. Fuchsia-colored fireweed spikes up from the grassy shores and the river braids through all of it. At the junction of three rivers, we come upon Klukwan, the mother village of the Tlingit Nation. From the water we can see a few buildings, including the school with its bell tower and American flag, along with a new cultural heritage center.

Our float lasts about an hour and a

half. At our haul out point, we find hot cocoa and sandwiches waiting for us. We take the bus back through the rugged outdoor community of Haines, where the dogs almost outnumber people, and where the friendly folks along the deepest fjord in North America, will go on about the business of living in one of the most beautiful and scenic places on earth. 🐾



IF YOU GO

SUMMER: A few major cruise lines offer shore excursions through the Chilkat Bald Eagle Preserve. Or you can book directly by contacting: chilkatguides.com.

WINTER: Roadside pullouts along the Haines Highway, recently designated as one of America's Scenic Byways, provide exceptional views of the congregating eagles.