

# NATURE PHOTOGRAPHER'S FIELD CONTRIBUTOR SITE

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## *The Eagles of Brackendale*

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*Article and Images  
by C.A. Klingsporn*  
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As an American citizen, one see lots of eagle images every day in advertising, in government publications and in the media. So I guess it isn't too much of a surprise to me that I have wanted to make a serious attempt to photograph eagles for many years. when I first became interested, there weren't many places eagles could be seen in the wild as they nearly died off as a species. Fortunately, in recent years, due to the Endangered



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Species Act protection and the end of killer pesticides such as DDT, the number of eagles to be seen has increased significantly. Although the bald eagle can now be seen throughout the United States and Canada, in the vast majority of places, the numbers are small and that makes it difficult to get good images. In most locations, your chances are somewhat dependent on luck as you are likely trying to find the one or two eagle pairs that may be in your area.



Where then can you go to see large numbers of eagles and therefore improve your chances of getting the kind of shots you want? While some eagles stay in the same general location year round, large numbers are migratory and disperse widely across the far north of Canada and Alaska during the summer months; in short, a long way from home for most U.S. Shooters. There are, however, several annual "Festivals" in places that are accessible. They are in the winter when the migratory eagles congregate on rivers where salmon have spawned and died in their effort to get upstream. The festival that I chose was the Brackendale Winter Festival in the town of the same name, just north of Vancouver, Canada. Brackendale hosts this festival each year in January when a small army of volunteers gather in the county annual. If you can't get there for the actual festival in mid-

January 2006, you will still be able to see and photograph the eagles from early december through February.



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While the numbers vary depending mainly on how cold the weather has been in northern Canada and Alaska, for the 20 years the festival has been in operation the annual count has averaged over 1,700. The annual range has varied from a low of 537 in 1986 to 3,769 in 1994. There are lots of eagles to see and photograph. In the year I was there, the count was just under 2,000. Brackendale claims to have the most eagles of any of the major festivals in the west.

Because I have not been to The Chilkat River in Alaska or The Skagit River in Washington State, the other two major western festivals, I have no personal comparison. I do know that my appetite for eagle photography was satisfied in the time I was at Brackendale.

Brackendale is in the Squamish Valley, adjacent to the resort town of Squamish, about a one hour drive north of Vancouver, a large city with all of the transportation systems and amenities of a major urban center. Vancouver will host the 2010 winter Olympics. Another hour north of Brackendale is the major ski resort complex of Whistler-Blackcomb; this location, the coastal mountains of British Columbia, results in both a variety of other photographic subjects and other travel/vacation activities in addition to eagle photography.

The activities of the festival and eagle viewing center around the Brackendale Art Gallery. The gallery and the places where eagles can be seen are in close proximity, all within less than 10 miles on good roads. The main viewing site, called Eagle Ridge, is a dike that is about a half to three-quarters of a mile long on the Squamish River. The dike is about 30 feet above the water level and in the winter, the water flow is relatively low leaving lots of beach on both sides of the river where the eagles scavenge. Your sight line is basically from above looking down on the river bank and the slight elevation may allow you to get good shots of eagles gliding in to land on the river bank. There is a stand of large cottonwood trees across the river where the birds roost when not feeding.

In addition to Eagle Ridge, there are other



possible shooting locations close by. Because this part of British Columbia is very mountainous and has high annual precipitation, the steep terrain includes many rivers and streams to drain the runoff from snow melt. The Squamish is a major river that empties directly into Howe sound and the Pacific ocean just north of Vancouver. It has many tributaries and fortunately, several of them come together at Brackendale. For eagle viewing, there are three close and excellent spots. The Cheakamus River will give you the closest access and has lots of rugged terrain. The good vantage points here are on the river bank, close to the birds, therefore, you will likely need a portable blind to be successful. Brennan Park is on the Mamquam River, another tributary of the Squamish. It has good vantage points looking down on the river from several bridges. The third spot is right on the banks of the Squamish at Fernwood Street where it is easy to get to and walk along the river edge.



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These locations are all in close proximity; the Cheakamus is furthest, about 10 miles north of Brackendale. Be forewarned, however, the eagles here are not national park birds; they are not acclimated to people. To get large images you will need good technique, a long lens and patience. the folks at the visitor center will tell you how to get to these and maybe other spots.

Another possible way to photograph the eagles is by taking a raft trip that floats down the Squamish past the main viewing area at Eagle Ridge. At this time of year, the water flow is usually slow enough that handheld shooting is possible. If you choose this approach, a 200–300mm lens with vibration reduction or image stabilization will serve you well. Be aware that luck will play a part in your effort; the eagles may not be in the right places when you float by.



If you tire of eagles, there are lots of other nature and landscape sites close by. If you get a clear day, a drive on Route 99, either south toward Vancouver or north to Whistler will yield many vantage points for shooting mountainscapes, rivers/waterfalls and shoreline. Other specific sites include



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Garibaldi Provincial Park named after Mt. Garibaldi, at about 8,800 feet, one of the highest peaks in this area. Garibaldi is a very large mixed-use (recreation and logging) mountainous park much like a national forest in the western United States. Brohm Lake Nature Center and the Alice Lake Provincial Park are also close by and smaller with easier terrain and with rainforest type vegetation and colors, even in the winter. Shannon Falls is a quite tall with several photographic vantage points. The Falls are visible from Route 99 and access only involves a short flat walk. All of these outstanding photography sites are within 30 minutes drive of Brackendale.

There are also several other provincial parks south of Brackendale, enroute to Vancouver. Much of the drive is right along the coast with harbor and ocean vistas.

Typical weather for this area in winter has temperatures in the 30s and 40s (Fahrenheit) with lots of clouds and high probability of rain or snow. Winter days are short with sunrise about 8:00 am and sunset between 4:30 and 5:00 pm. You will need wet weather gear along with fast film; if you shoot digital, be prepared to shoot at high ISOs. During the eight days I was there, we had one sunny day and one significant snowfall, the rest were cloudy with intermittent rain, drizzle and/or snow flurries.

The festival has a web site—<http://www.brackendaleartgallery.com>. They can also be reached by email—[BrackendaleArtGallery@telus.net](mailto:BrackendaleArtGallery@telus.net). If you want to add some eagles to your portfolio, Brackendale may be just the place for you; it certainly was for me.

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