

# REBECCA BORLAND REYNOLDS

## *TRAVEL*



## Duck, Duck, Eagle

BY REBECCA BORLAND REYNOLDS

My morning ritual includes sipping hot coffee on the long porch overlooking the mudflats. I like to check in on life: where the ducks are milling about, if the otter is floating by or the eagles are sitting on the island across the way, are there herons in view and if the geese are disgruntled or not. There's a lot going on, even when it looks fairly calm. But this morning was different.

This morning the honking and squawking of geese and ducks filled the air. And from the sounds of it, a lot of them. My eyes traced back and forth across the sky and between the islands in search of the ruckus' source. I felt like a spectator at Wimbledon and nearly made myself dizzy. Nothing. Until suddenly, the sky filled with actual birds - hundreds of them flying in great clouds, in all directions. Geese going this way, ducks going that, and song birds flitting about in between. Even a heron grunted its prehistoric call as it flew up and over the house.

In the mix, I also spied several eagles. There are a pair that often settle themselves in high branches on the island close by. I look for them and when I spot them, somehow am comforted. But this morning, there were three or four eagles soaring mostly on the opposite side of the island, and I'd get a glimpse as one or another of them swooped into view. As I sat watching, I thought it was like a grand avian highway had just opened



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up, and I wondered what was causing all the commotion.

After a while, things seemed to return to relative calm and I'd finished my coffee, so I headed back inside to make a second cup. From my spot on the couch, I looked up as I dragged my laptop onto my knees. My eye caught something big sitting on the flats. I had to see what it was. Out the window, I saw what appeared to be a great black bird, settled by itself in the muck of low tide. A raven, I wondered. Peering through the binocs, I thought it looked too big for a raven, but the head wasn't the snowy white of an eagle. I went back out to the porch for a closer look.

As the door cased open, I heard the unmistakable shriek and realized that this great bird on the flat was its source. The shadow of the island shrouded its brilliant head, but the size of the bird could only be one thing. Why was it screeching so, I asked myself. As I watched through the binocs, it didn't move except to open its mouth in a shrill cry. Just then three other eagles flew overhead. They returned some of the call and then took off down the inlet. The lone eagle sat unmoving on the flat. I decided to sit with it to see what it would do.

After a bit, the eagle quieted down, but still it didn't move. Nor did it reach down and peck where I assumed it must have a fish. And since it didn't, I wondered if it might be stuck. And if its calls had actually been calls for help. Worry bubbled up in my core - pity for this great master of the air, apparently grounded by who knew what. Now I resolved to stay with the eagle, to make sure it was okay.

I took a few pictures; its head turning this way and then that. I waited. And then, out of nowhere, the great wings spread. I clicked the camera. With one deft movement, up it lifted. Click. Click. Higher it rose, revealing something dark hanging limp from its talons. Click, click, click. And then in one grand arc, it flew higher and lifted its feet back under the glistening white tail until whatever it held was magically gone. It flew right across my view without any hint of what it carried. It was as sure and perfect as anything I'd ever seen.

Back inside, I immediately reviewed the pictures. I zoomed in. Closer. I'd assumed the eagle had lifted a fish into the air, but my examination showed what could only have been a beak.

So that was it. The eagles were hunting on the fly. The whole inlet of birds knew. Surely, one of the eagles actually knocked that duck right out of the air. Maybe that's what caused the sudden scattershot of birds across the sky. And the eagle, whom I'd presumed to pity, did exactly as it knew to do. Not shouting for help or from glory or pride, but simply making it clear that it had its prey. And then waiting. Whether for the duck to smother in the muddy water or to bleed out from the talon's puncture, or for the coast to be clear, no one knows.

As I gazed at the flaccid beak in the camera's viewer, I thought of beaks used by other ducks with such perfect precision as they feed on cold and dark waters. I realized that, of course eagles kill ducks, not just fish. It made perfect sense, but somehow having witnessed it saddened me. And then I thought how silly it is to make up these stories that cause pity - for eagles or ducks or whatever. The trick is to be a witness to all and to feel the simple majesty in that.